Madge Morton

Captain of the Merry Maid

THE MADGE MORTON BOOKS

To Ruby
From Jubelo Cliffie.

Dec. 25, 1914

Their Houseboat Vacation Had Begun.

Frontispiece.

Madge Morton, Captain of the Merry Maid

By

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P H I L A D E L P H I A

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Madge Morton, Captain of the Merry Maid

CHAPTER I

MADGE MORTON'S PLAN

"I NEVER can bear it!" cried Madge Morton excitedly, throwing herself down on her bed in one of the dormitories of Miss Tolliver's Select School for Girls. "It is not half so bad for Eleanor. She, at least, is going to spend her holiday with people she likes. But for Uncle William and Aunt Sue to leave for California just as school closes, and to send me off to a horrid old maid cousin for half my vacation, is just too awful! If I weren't nearly seventeen years old, I'd cry my eyes out."

Madge was alone in her bedroom, which she shared with her cousin, Eleanor Butler. The two girls lived on an old estate in Virginia, but for the two preceding terms they had been attending a college preparatory school at Harborpoint, not far from the city of Baltimore.

Madge had never known her own parents. She had been reared by her Uncle William and

Aunt Sue Butler and she dearly loved her old southern home. But just when she and Eleanor were planning a thousand pleasures for their three months' vacation a letter had arrived from Mr. and Mrs. Butler announcing that they were leaving their estate for six weeks, as they were compelled to go west on important business. Eleanor was to be sent to visit a family of cousins near Charlottesville, Virginia, and Madge was to stay with a rich old maiden cousin of her father. Cousin Louisa did not like Madge. She felt a sense of duty toward her, and a sense of duty seldom inspires any real affection in return. So Madge looked back on the visits she had made to this cousin with a feeling of horror. Inspired by her Aunt Sue, Madge had always tried to be on her best behavior while she was the guest of Cousin Louisa. But since propriety was not Madge Morton's strong point she had succeeded only in being perfectly miserable and in offending her wealthy cousin by her unconventional ways.

Madge had a letter from this cousin in her hand while she gave herself up to the luxury of despair. She had not yet read the letter, but she knew exactly what it would say. It would contain a formal invitation from Cousin Louisa, asking Madge to pay her the necessary visit. It would suggest at the same time that Madge

mend her ways; and it would doubtless recall the unfortunate occasion when Mistress Madge had set fire to the bedclothes by her wicked habit of reading in bed.

It was the study hour at Miss Tolliver's school, and all of the girls except Madge were hard at work. Eleanor had slipped across the hall to the room of their two chums to consult them about a problem in algebra. Madge at that moment was far too miserable to be approached in regard to a lesson, though at other times she would have done anything for Eleanor.

Finally Madge raised herself to a sitting posture. It struck her as rather absurd to have collapsed so entirely, simply because she was not to spend the first part of her summer as she chose. She knew, too, that it was high time she fell to preparing her lessons.

With a little shiver she opened Cousin Louisa's letter. Suddenly her eyes flashed, the color glowed in her cheeks, and Madge dropped the note to the floor with a glad cry and ran out of the room.

On the door of her chums' room was a sign, printed in large letters, which was usually observed by the school girls. The sign read: "Studying; No Admittance." But to-day Madge paid no attention to it. She flung open the door and rushed in upon her three friends.

"Eleanor, Phyllis, Lillian," she protested, "stop studying this very minute!" She seized Eleanor's paper and pencil and closed Lillian Seldon's ancient history with a bang. Phyllis Alden had just time to grasp her own notebook firmly with both hands before she exclaimed: "Madge Morton, whatever has happened to you? Have you gone entirely crazy?"

Madge laughed. "Almost!" she replied. "But just listen to me, and you will be nearly as crazy as I am."

Madge had dark, auburn hair, which was curly and short, like a boy's. To her deep regret her long braids had been cut off several years before, when she was recovering from an attack of typhoid fever, and now her hair was just long enough to tuck into a small knot on top of her head. But when Madge was excited, which was a frequent occurrence, this knot would break loose, and her curls would fly about, like the hair of one of Raphael's cherubs. Madge had large, blue eyes, with long, dark lashes, and a short, straight nose, with just the tiniest tilt at the end of it. Although she was not vain, she was secretly proud of her row of even, white teeth.

Phyllis Alden was the daughter of a physician with a large family, who lived in Hartford, Connecticut. Phil was not as pretty as her

three friends, and no one knew it better than Phyllis. She was small and dark, with irregular features. But she had large, black eyes, and a smile that illuminated her clever face. Put to the vote, Phyllis Alden had been declared to be the most popular girl in Miss Tolliver's school, and Phyllis and Madge were friendly rivals in athletics.

Lillian Seldon was perhaps the prettiest of the four boarding school chums, if one preferred regular features to vivacity and charm. Lillian was of Madge's age, a tall, slender, blonde girl, with two long plaits of sunny, light hair, a fair, delicate skin and blue eyes. She was the daughter of a Philadelphia lawyer and an only child. A number of her school companions thought her cold and proud, but her chums knew that when Lillian really cared for any one she was the most loyal friend in the world. Eleanor, who was the youngest of the four school friends, looked like the little, southern girl that she was. She had light brown hair and hazel eyes, and charming manners which made friends for her wherever she went.

The three girls now waited with their eyes fixed inquiringly on the fourth. They were not very much excited; they knew Madge only too well. She was either in the seventh heaven of bliss, or else in the depths of despair. Yet this

time it did look as though Madge had more reason than usual for her excitement. Eleanor wondered how she could have changed so quickly from her recent disconsolate mood.

"What has happened to you, Madge?" Lillian inquired. "Eleanor said you were upset because you are obliged to spend the first of your vacation with your hateful Cousin Louisa."

"Hateful? Did I ever dare to say that my Cousin Louisa was hateful? She is one of the loveliest women in this world! Just think! Cousin Louisa has written to say that she can't have me, or rather won't have me, visit her. She is going to shut up her house, and is going to sail for Europe. I know it is just to escape my odious presence."

"Why, Madge, what will you do?" Eleanor asked. "You've nowhere else to go. You know how you hate those awful children at Charlottesville."

"Wait, Eleanor Butler—wait!" Madge cried dramatically. "You do not know what has happened, nor why I now truly love and adore the same Cousin Louisa whom I once thought I disliked. Just look here." Madge waved a small strip of paper in the air. "Cousin Louisa has sent me a check for two hundred dollars! She says I am to spend the money on my sum-

mer vacation in any way I like, provided Aunt Sue and Uncle William approve."

"But you can't go off traveling by yourself," objected Eleanor. "I should think you would hate to spend your summer alone."

"Alone!" Madge answered indignantly. "Who said I meant to spend my vacation alone? I want you three girls to spend the six weeks with me. Only last night Eleanor and I said that we four girls could never be really happy anywhere without one another."

"Generous Madge," smiled Lillian affectionately. "Two hundred dollars seems quite a fortune. Perhaps you ought not to spend it all. Where can we go, and what can we do?"

"Young ladies," a stern voice spoke just outside the door, "kindly remember this is the study hour. You are expected to keep silence."

An unusual stillness fell on the four offenders. Only Madge's blue eyes flashed rebelliously. "It's that tiresome Miss Jones. You might know she would be somewhere about. She is the crossest teacher in this school."

"Sh-sh, Madge," Eleanor lowered her voice, "Miss Jones might hear you. She is ill, I am sure. That is what makes her so cross. Phil and I are both sorry for her."

"Oh, you and Phil are sorry for everybody. That's nothing! Thank goodness, there is the

bell! It is the recreation hour. Come, my beloved chums, I simply must think of some way to spend our vacation and I never can think indoors. 'It is the merry month of May,' " caroled Madge. "Come, Phil, let us go down to the water and take Nell and Lillian rowing. It is a dream of an afternoon, all soft and sunshiny, and the river folk are calling us, the frogs, and the water rats——"

"Dear me, Madge," teased Phil, "do hush. We are glad enough to go rowing without an invitation from the frogs. We have two hours before supper time. Shall we ask poor Miss Jones to go with us? She does not have much fun, and you know it is her duty to make us keep the rules. Miss Jones admires you very much, Madge. She said you were clever enough to do anything you liked, if you would only try. But she knows you don't like her."

"Then she knows the truth," returned naughty Madge. "No, Phil, please don't ask Miss Jones to come out with us this afternoon, there's a dear. I told you I wanted to think. And I can think brilliantly only when in the company of my beloved chums."

Phyllis Alden and Madge Morton were good oarsmen. Indeed, they were almost as much at home on the water as they were on land. Each girl wore a tiny silver oar pinned to her dress.

Only the week before Madge had won the annual spring rowing contest; for Miss Tolliver made a special point of athletics in her school, and fortunately the school grounds ran down to the bank of a small river.

Phil and Madge rowed out into the middle of the river with long, regular strokes. They were in their own little, green boat, called the "Water Witch." Lillian sat in the stern, trailing her white hands idly in the water. Eleanor sat quietly looking out over the fields.

Suddenly Madge, who always did the most unexpected things in the world, locked her oars across the boat and sat up in her seat with a jerk that rocked the little craft.

"Girls, I have thought it all out!" she exclaimed. "I have the most glorious, the most splendid plan you ever heard of in the world! Just wait until you hear it!"

"Madge," Phil called in horror, "*do* sit down!" The boat was careening perilously. Before Phil could finish her speech Madge had tumbled over the side of the skiff and disappeared in the water below.

The girls waited for their friend to rise to the surface. They were not frightened, for Madge was an expert swimmer.

"I am surprised at Madge," declared Phil severely. "The idea of plunging into the water

in that fashion, not to mention almost capsizing our boat! Why doesn't she come up?"

The second lengthened to a minute. Still Madge's curly head did not appear on the surface of the water. Eleanor's face turned white. Madge had on her rowing costume, a short skirt and a sailor blouse. She could easily swim in such a suit. But perhaps she had been seized with a cramp, or her head might have struck against a rock at the bottom of the river!

Lillian and Phil shared Eleanor's anxiety. "Sit still, girls," said Phyllis. "I must dive and see what has happened to Madge. If you are quiet, I can dive out of the boat without upsetting it."

Phil slipped out of her sweater. But Eleanor caught at her skirts from behind. "Sit down, Phil. Here comes that wretched Madge, swimming toward us from over there. She purposely stayed under water."

The three friends looked in the direction indicated by Phyllis. They saw Madge moving toward the boat as calmly as though she had been in her bathing suit and had dived off the skiff for pure pleasure. She had been swimming under the water for a little distance and had risen at a spot at which her friends were not looking. As she lifted her head clear of the water a ray of the afternoon sunlight slanted

across her face, touching its mischievous curves, until she looked like a naughty water-sprite.

In an instant Madge's hands were alongside the boat, and Phil pulled her into it. "I am so sorry, girls," she explained, shaking the water out of her hair; "but I had such a wonderful idea that it really knocked me overboard. I was afraid I would throw you all into the river, so I jumped. But don't you want to know my plan? We are going to spend the summer on the water!"

"In the water, you mean, don't you?" laughed Phyllis, as she wrapped her sweater about her friend. "Madge, will any one ever be able to guess what you are going to do next?"

"Just listen, girls," Madge went on with shining eyes. "I have been determined, ever since I got my letter from Cousin Louisa, that we girls should do something original for our summer vacation. And while I was rowing peacefully along, without meaning to create a disturbance, it suddenly came to me that the most perfect way to spend a holiday would be to live out on the water. First I thought we might just take the 'Water Witch' and row along the river all summer, sleeping in hotels and boarding-places at night. But I know we must have a chaperon; and meals and things would make it cost too much. Then it occurred to me that we could

get a boat big enough to live in by day and sleep in by night—a canal boat, or something——"

"Madge Morton!" cried Phil, clapping both hands, "you are a goose, but sometimes I think you are a genius as well. You mean you can rent a houseboat with your money and we can truly spend our vacation together out on the water. I never heard of such a splendid plan in my life."

Madge gave a little shiver, half from the cold and half from happiness. She was beginning to feel the chill of her wet clothing.

"Eleanor, Phyllis, Lillian," she said impressively. "I hereby invite you to spend six weeks of your vacation aboard a houseboat. Now, the next thing to be done is to find one."

CHAPTER II

CHOOSING A CHAPERON

MADGE MORTON walked into the school library with a grave expression on her usually laughing face. She had two letters in her hand, which she intended putting into the school post-bag, that was always kept in the library. One of the letters she had written to her uncle and aunt, explaining her houseboat scheme in the most sensible and matter-of-fact fashion; for Madge knew that the fate of the four chums depended, first, on what Mr. and Mrs. Butler thought of their niece's idea. If they disapproved, Madge was certain that she could never be happy again, for there was no other possible way of spending Cousin Louisa's gift that would give her any pleasure. Madge's second letter was directed to a boy cousin, who was at college in Baltimore. She explained that she expected to rent a houseboat for the summer, and she asked her cousin to give her the address of places in Baltimore where such a boat could be hired. She wished it to cost the smallest sum of money possible, for Eleanor had suggested that even houseboat girls must eat. Indeed, the water was likely to make them espe-

cially hungry. If all the two hundred dollars went for the houseboat, what were they to do for food?

Madge's sole fortune was just ten dollars a month, which she used for her dress allowance. Her uncle and aunt were not rich, but they were paying for her education, and Madge knew she was expected to make her own living as soon as she was old enough. Mr. and Mrs. Butler had hoped she would become a teacher, for they held the old-fashioned southern belief that teaching school was the only avenue open to the woman who was forced by necessity to make her own living.

Madge, however, had decided, a long time before, that she would much rather die than teach. She would do anything but that. Just at present her poverty was very inconvenient. Madge was generous to a fault, and she would have liked nothing better than to finance royally their proposed trip. She vowed mentally to rise to the occasion, even though the way to do it was not yet clear.

Prudent Eleanor had also asked her whom she meant to invite to act as their chaperon. So it was of this chaperon that Madge was thinking while she was in the act of mailing her letters.

Down in Virginia, on a big place next to her uncle's, was a girl whom she had decided

would make an ideal chaperon. She was as fond of larks as was Madge herself. She could fish, ride, swim and shoot a rifle when necessary. Moreover, she was so beautiful and aristocratic that Madge always called her the "Lady of Quality." It was true she could not cook nor wash dishes, nor do anything practical, and she was only twenty-two. Still, Madge thought she would be a perfectly delightful chaperon and was sure the girls would love her. Madge's red lips unconsciously formed the letter O, and before she knew what she was doing she was whistling from sheer pleasure.

"Miss Morton," the cold voice that was unpleasantly familiar to the girl's ears came from behind a chair, "do you not know that whistling is against the rules of the school? You are one of the older girls. Miss Tolliver depends on you to set the younger pupils a good example. I fear she is sadly disappointed."

"You mean you are sadly disappointed, Miss Jones," replied Madge angrily. "Miss Tolliver has not said she was disappointed in me. When she is she will probably tell me herself."

Madge knew she should not speak in this rude fashion to her teacher, but she was an impetuous, high-spirited girl who could not bear censure. Besides, she had a special prejudice against Miss Jones. She was particularly

homely and there was something awkward and repellant in her manner. Worshipping beauty and graciousness, Madge could not forgive her teacher her lack of both. Besides, Madge did not entirely trust Miss Jones. Still, the girl was sorry she had made her impolite speech, so she stood quietly waiting for her teacher's reproof, with her curly head bent low, her eyes mutinous.

She waited an instant. When she looked up, to her dismay she saw that the eyes of her despised teacher were full of tears.

"I wonder why you dislike me so, Miss Morton?" Miss Jones inquired sadly.

Madge could have given her a dozen reasons for her dislike, but she did not wish to be disagreeable. "I am dreadfully sorry I was so rude to you," she murmured.

"Oh, it does not matter. Nothing matters, I am so unhappy," Miss Jones replied unexpectedly. Just why Miss Jones should have chosen Madge Morton for her confidante at this moment neither ever knew. Miss Jones had a number of friends among the other girls in the school; but she and this clever southern girl had been enemies since Miss Jones had first taken charge of the English History class and had reproved Madge for helping one of the younger girls with her lesson. Miss Jones's confession had slipped

out involuntarily. Now she put her head down on the library table and sobbed.

With any other teacher, or with any of the girls, Madge might have cried in sympathy. Somehow, she could not cry with Miss Jones. She felt nothing save embarrassment.

"What is the matter?" she asked slowly.

Miss Jones shook her head. "It's nothing. I am sorry to have given way to my feelings. I have had bad news. My doctor has just written me that if I don't spend the summer out-of-doors, I am in danger of consumption." Miss Jones uttered the dreadful word quite calmly.

Madge gave a low cry of distress. She thought of the number of times she had made fun of her teacher's flat chest and stooping shoulders and of her bad temper. After all, Eleanor had been right. Illness had been the cause of Miss Jones's peculiarities.

"Miss Jones," Madge returned, her sympathies fully enlisted, "you must not feel so troubled. I am sure you will soon be all right. Just think how strong you will grow with your long summer holiday out-of-doors. You must dig in the garden, and ride horseback, and play tennis," advised Madge enthusiastically, remembering her own happy summers at "Forest House," the old Butler home in Virginia.

Miss Jones shook her head wistfully as she

rose to leave the room. "I am afraid I can't have the summer in the country. I have only a sister with whom to spend the summer, and she lives in a little flat in the city. She has a large family, and I expect to help her. My parents are dead."

"Then why don't you go into the country to board somewhere?" flashed from Madge's lips unexpectedly. A moment after she was sorry she had asked the question, for a curious, frightened expression crossed her teacher's face.

Miss Jones hesitated. "I have had to use the money I have made by my teaching for—for other purposes," she explained, in the stiff, cold manner that seemed so unattractive to gracious, sunshiny Madge. "I am sorry to have worried you with my troubles," Miss Jones said again. "Please forgive me and forget what I have told you. I shall probably do very well."

Madge went slowly back to her room in a most unhappy frame of mind. She knew a way in which Miss Jones would be able to spend her summer out-of-doors, and perhaps grow well and strong again. She could be invited to chaperon the houseboat party. She knew her friends would immediately agree to the idea. They liked Miss Jones far better than she did. Even if they had not liked her, sympathy would have

inspired them to extend the invitation. It was she alone who would hesitate. Of course, she never expected to be as good as her friends. So Madge argued with herself. It was too dreadful to give up the idea of asking her adored "Lady of Quality" to act as their guardian angel. Madge decided she simply could not make the sacrifice. Then, too, she did not even know whether her uncle and aunt would consent to the houseboat party. It would be time enough afterward to deliver her last invitation.

For two days, which seemed intolerably long to impatient Madge Morton, the four friends waited to hear their fate from Mr. and Mrs. Butler.

On the third morning a letter addressed to Madge in Mrs. Butler's handwriting was handed to her while she and her chums were at breakfast. In her great excitement her hands trembled so that she could hardly finish her breakfast. "Here, Eleanor," Madge finally faltered, as the four girls left the dining room to go upstairs, "you take the letter and read it to us, please do. Positively I haven't the courage to look at it. I feel almost sure that Aunt Sue will say we can't go on our houseboat trip."

Lillian put her hand affectionately on Madge's arm, while Phil stood next to Eleanor.

"My dear Madge," the letter began, "I think your houseboat plan for the summer a most extraordinary one. I never heard of young girls attempting such a holiday before. I can not imagine how you happened to unearth such a peculiar idea."

Madge gave a gasp of despair. She felt that the tone of her Aunt Sue's letter spelled refusal. But Eleanor read on: "Like a good many of your unusual ideas, this houseboat scheme seems, after all, to be rather an interesting one. Your uncle and I have talked over your letter and Eleanor's. We do not wish you and Eleanor to be separated, and we do wish you both to have the happiest holiday possible, as we are quite sure you have earned it. So, if you can find a suitable chaperon, we are willing to give our consent to your undertaking. We had intended to pay twenty-five dollars a month board for Eleanor with her cousins at Charlottesville, so we shall be glad to contribute that sum toward the provisioning of the houseboat."

There was a dead silence in the room when Eleanor at last finished reading the letter. For half a minute the four chums were too happy to speak. Then there was a united sigh of relief.

"Oh, I shall never be able to survive it! It

is too much joy for one day!" cried the irrepressible Madge, dancing around in a circle and dragging Lillian Seldon, whose arm was linked in hers, with her.

Lillian and Phyllis had received their parents' consent, by letter, the day before and had already agreed that their respective monthly allowances should be placed in the general fund.

"Be still, Madge," begged Eleanor. "You are so noisy that you drive all thought from our heads. The first thing for us to consider is where we shall find a chaperon."

"No; the first thing to do is to find the houseboat. O Ship of our Dreams! tell us, dear Ship, where we can find you?" cried Phillis Alden longingly. She was looking past her friends with half-closed eyes. Already she was, in the land of her imagination, in a beautiful white boat, floating beside an evergreen shore. The little craft was furnished all in white, with dainty muslin curtains hung at the tiny cabin windows. Flowers encircled the decks and trailed over the sides into the clear water. And on the deck of the little boat, lying or sitting at their ease, she could see herself and her friends.

"Wake up, Phil! Come back to earth, please," teased Madge, giving her usually sensible friend a sudden pinch. "I am going downstairs now to ask Miss Tolliver if we can go into

Baltimore day after to-morrow. We must find our houseboat at once. School is so nearly over Miss Tolliver will be sure to let us go."

"But the chaperon, Madge," reminded Eleanor. "We haven't decided on one, you know."

"I have thought of a chaperon, if you girls are willing to have her," said Madge almost hesitatingly.

"Well," cried the other three voices in chorus, "who is it? Tell us sometime to-day!"

"Miss Jones!" declared Madge, a note of defiance in her voice. "I'm going to invite her now before I have time to change my mind. I'll explain later." Springing from her chair, she ran from the room, leaving her three friends to stare at each other in silent amazement.

CHAPTER III

THE SEARCH FOR A HOUSEBOAT

"ELEANOR BUTLER, do hurry!" urged Madge two days later. "If we miss the train, I feel I shall never forgive you." The two girls were preparing for their trip to Baltimore.

"Let me alone, Madge," Eleanor returned. "If you will stay out of the room for ten minutes, I promise to be ready. You've talked so much in the last half hour that I haven't known what I was doing and I don't know now. You had better make another call upon Miss Jones. She is even more enthusiastic about your old houseboat scheme than you are." Eleanor laughed as Madge disappeared in the direction of Miss Jones's room.

"You must wish with all your heart that we shall find the houseboat to-day, Miss Jones," declared Madge in her impulsive fashion. "You see, everything depends on our not having to waste any time. The sooner we find our boat, the sooner we can begin our delightful vacation."

Miss Jones smiled. She was beginning to understand the impetuous Madge better than she

had ever dreamed of knowing her, and she was very grateful for her invitation. Miss Jones was fairly well aware of how much it had cost her pupil to ask her. "Yes, I shall be thinking of you girls every minute," she declared. "Let me see. This is the twenty-fifth of May. School will close in another week. You girls wish to spend a week at home with your parents and relatives; but just as early in June as possible we are to go aboard our houseboat. That is our plan, isn't it, Madge?"

Madge nodded. Then, as she heard Phil and Lillian calling her, she waved a hasty farewell and darted from the room.

Madge had received a letter from the boy cousin who was at school in Baltimore. He had given her several addresses in Baltimore where there was just a bare chance that she might find a ready-to-use houseboat. He assured her, however, that houseboats were usually made to order, and that she might find some difficulty in securing what she wished, and must, therefore, not become easily discouraged.

Just before noon the four young women arrived in Baltimore on their quest for a houseboat. Lillian and Eleanor demanded their luncheon at once, but Phil and Madge protested against eating luncheon so early. "You can't be hungry already," argued Madge. "As

for me, I shall never be able to eat until we find our boat."

For two hours the girls tramped about the boat yards in search of their treasure. They saw canoes and motor boats of every size and kind, and models of private yachts, but not a trace of a houseboat could they find. The representatives of the various boat companies whom they interviewed suggested the building of a houseboat at a cost of anywhere from six hundred to a thousand dollars.

Lillian and Eleanor were the first to complain of being tired. Then Phil, who was usually the sweetest-tempered of the four girls, began to show signs of irritability. Madge, however, undaunted and determined, would not think of giving up the search.

"Just one more place, girls," she begged; "then we can rest and have our luncheon somewhere. This is a very large ship-building yard we are going to. I am sure we can find our boat there."

Half an hour later the four chums turned wearily away from another fruitless quest. They were now in a part of Baltimore which none of them had ever seen before. A few blocks farther down the street they could see the line of the water and the masts of several sailing vessels that were lying near the shore.

"I tell you, Madge Morton," declared Phyllis Alden firmly, "whether or not we ever find a houseboat, there is one thing certain: I positively must have something to eat. I am half starved. What good would finding the boat do me if I were to die of hunger before I have even seen it?"

"Please don't be cross, Phil," soothed Madge. "I am sure we are all as hungry as you are. I am awfully sorry. We ought to have eaten luncheon before we came here. There isn't a restaurant in sight."

"I am sure I saw the sign of a funny little restaurant as we came by the corner," broke in Lillian. "It did look queer, but I suppose it would not be any harm for us to go in there."

"We don't care if it does look queer," declared Phyllis stoutly.

Turning, the girls retraced their steps to the corner.

Outside the swinging door of the small restaurant they hesitated. "I don't think we ought to go in there," argued Eleanor, "it is such a dreadfully rough-looking place."

It was indeed a very common eating house, where the men who worked on the wharves, the fishermen and sailors, were in the habit of getting their meals. The one dirty window showed half a dozen live crabs crawling about

inside among the pieces of sea-weed. A row of old pies formed the background.

A moment later they had marched bravely up to the door. Dainty Eleanor shuddered as they crossed the threshold, and even Phil and Madge hesitated as a man's coarse laugh greeted them once they were fairly inside the restaurant room.

"Come on, children," said Madge, with a pretence of bravery she was far from feeling. "We are going into this restaurant to get something to eat. Don't look as if you thought you were going to be eaten. It is rather horrid, but perhaps they will let us have some bread and milk."

The quartette seated themselves at the first table they saw vacant. Just across from it were a number of men with rough, hard faces. They were evidently sailors from the nearby boats. The girls kept their eyes on the table, and Madge gave their order for tea and sandwiches in a low tone to the German boy who came forward to wait on them.

When the boy had departed with their order a silence settled upon the little group of girls. In each girl's mind was the thought that it had been unwise to enter the restaurant. By this time they had come to a realization of the fact that they were the only women in the room.

"We ought never to have come here," whispered Lillian, clutching Madge's arm.

"Nonsense," returned Madge bravely, "we have as much right here as any of these men."

"But I'd rather not stay," persisted Lillian.

"Didn't you say you were hungry?" asked Madge pointedly.

"Ye-es," hesitated Lillian, "but I just can't stay here."

"Nor I," chimed in Eleanor.

Madge looked appealingly at Phyllis, who shook her brown head deprecatingly. "I don't believe we ought to stay here, Madge."

"You, too, Phil!" exclaimed Madge impatiently. "All right, Misses 'Fraid Cats,' we'll go. Here comes our luncheon, too."

The girls glanced quickly at the rosy-faced lad who came up at that moment with their order on a tray.

"I'm so hungry," sighed Phil. "Perhaps we'd better——"

"So glad you've changed your mind," commented Madge rather satirically. "But what about you, Lillian and Eleanor?"

"Let's stay this once, but next time we'll be more careful where we lunch," smiled Eleanor.

"I take back all I said about 'Fraid Cats,'" laughed Madge. "We'll hurry through our luncheon and leave here the moment we finish.

After all, as long as we are to become seasoned mariners we shall have to learn to accustom ourselves to the vicissitudes of a sailor's life."

"But we can't be 'seasoned mariners' until we find our houseboat," reminded Lillian. "It doesn't look as though we'd find it to-day, either."

"We must," was Madge's emphatic response. "Here we have been worrying like mad about this restaurant not being a proper place in which to eat our luncheon, while the really important question of where we are to find our boat hasn't troubled us. We must go out of here saying, 'We shall find it, we shall find it,' and then I believe we can't help but run across it." Madge's blue eyes were alight with purpose and enthusiasm.

"Good for you, Madge," laughed Phil. "Come on, girls. Let us finish our tea and renew our search."

It was half-past three in the afternoon when they left the little restaurant. The four girls were to spend the night in Baltimore with a friend of Miss Tolliver's, who kept a boarding-place. As they were in the habit of staying with Miss Rice when they came into Baltimore to do their shopping, Miss Tolliver had, for once, after many instructions, permitted the girls to go into town without a chaperon.

"Miss Rice said we did not have to be at her house until half-past five o'clock," Phil volunteered, "so what shall we do?"

"There is a little park down there near the water," Lillian pointed ahead. "Suppose we sit down there for a few minutes until we decide where to go next?"

It was a balmy, sunshiny May day. While the girls rested on the park benches they could see, far off, a line of ships sailing up the bay and also the larger freight steamers. They were near one of the quiet canals that formed an inlet from the great Chesapeake Bay. Lining the banks of the canal were numbers of coal barges and canal boats.

On the deck of a canal boat a girl came out with a bundle of clothes in her arms. She was singing in a high, sweet voice as she hung them on a line strung across the deck of the boat.

The girls watched her silently as she flitted back and forth, and she sang on, unconscious of her audience. She was singing a boat song which the men chant as they row home at the close of day. The pathos in the woman's voice was so exquisite, its notes so true, that Madge's blue eyes filled with tears. None of the four friends stirred until the song was over, and the girl in her faded calico dress and bare feet had disappeared into the cabin of the boat.

"We call those boats shanty boats down in Virginia," Eleanor said; "I suppose because the little cabin on the deck of the canal boat looks so like a shanty."

"People live on those shanty boats," announced Madge.

"Yes, we have noticed it, my dear girl," Phil responded dryly. But there was a question in her eyes as she looked at Madge.

"Shanty boats do not look exactly like houseboats," went on Madge speculatively.

"I should say not," returned Phil. "There is considerable difference."

"But they might be made to look *more* like them. Don't you believe so?"

Phil nodded.

"They are awfully dirty," was dainty Lillian's sole comment.

"Soap and water, child, is a sure cure for dirt," replied Madge, still in a brown study. Then she sprang to her feet and almost ran out of the little park, nearly to the edge of the canal. Her friends followed her. There was no doubt that Madge had an idea.

"Girls!" exclaimed Madge fervently, pointing toward one of the shanty boats, "first look there; then shut your eyes. With your eyes open you see only an ugly canal boat; with them closed, can't you see our houseboat?"

"Not very well," replied Lillian without enthusiasm.

"Well, I can," asserted Madge with emphasis.

Then her quick eyes wandered toward a man who was coming slowly up the path along the canal.

"Please," she asked breathlessly, stepping directly in front of him, "do you know whether any of the people along here would be willing to rent me a canal boat?"

The man stared in amazement at this strange request. "Can't say as I knows of any one," he answered, "but I kin find out fer ye. It may be some of the water folks goes inland for the summer. If they does, they'd like as not rent you their boat."

"Then I will come down here to-morrow at nine o'clock to find out," arranged Madge. "Please be sure to be here."

"What did I tell you?" exulted Madge as they left the little park a few minutes later and made their way to the street car. "I am going to draw a plan to-night to show how easy it will be to turn one of these old canal boats into our beautiful 'Ship of Dreams.' By this time next week we'll know something about the 'vicissitudes' of a sailor's life or my name is not Madge Morton."

CHAPTER IV

THE FAIRY'S WAND

"YOU are a direct gift of Providence, Jack Bolling," declared Madge the next morning, shaking hands with her cousin, in the parlor of Miss Rice's boarding house. "How did you happen to turn up here?"

"Well, I unexpectedly had a day off from college," explained Jack. "So I just telephoned to Miss Tolliver to ask whether I might come to see you, like the well-behaved cousin I am. She replied that you were in town and that I might come to see you. So here I am! What luck have you had?"

"None at all at the old places you recommended," Madge returned scornfully and in a most ungrateful fashion.

"Oh, I knew a girl couldn't find the right sort of boat without a fellow to help her," Jack teased, knowing Madge's aversion to the idea that a girl couldn't do anything she liked, unless with the help of a boy.

"Just you come along with us, Jack, and we will show you what we have found," invited Madge. "I think the girls are ready. We are.

Here come Eleanor and Lillian. Miss Lillian Seldon, I wish to present my cousin, Mr. Jack Bolling. Where is Phil?"

While Lillian, looking unusually lovely in her gown of pale lavender organdie, with a cream-colored hat covered with violets, was shaking hands with Jack, Phyllis Alden came down the hall with a slight frown on her face.

Hadn't she and Madge vowed within themselves and to each other never to ask a man's help in anything they planned to do? And here was Madge introducing her cousin into their plan the very first chance she had. But in this Phil was mistaken.

Madge had made no explanations to Jack, and her cousin asked her no questions as the party started on their walk. When they came to the line of canal boats that the girls had seen the afternoon before a halt was made.

"There is our houseboat!" cried Madge, waving her hand toward the half dozen disreputable looking canal boats huddled close together.

"Where?" asked Jack in amazement.

"Oh, I don't know just exactly where," returned Madge with twinkling eyes. "Everyone look here, please." She took two large squares of white paper out of her bag. "You see, it is this way, Jack: We found that to rent a house-

boat takes such a lot of money that we decided, yesterday, to try to turn one of these old canal boats into a houseboat, and I have drawn the plans of what I think ought to be done."

Madge, who had a decided talent for drawing, had sat up late into the night to make her two sketches. One pictured the shanty boat as it was, dingy and dirty, with a broken-down cabin of two rooms at the stern. In the second drawing Madge's fairy wand, which was her gift of imagination, had quite transformed the ugly boat. The deck of the canal boat was about forty feet long, with a twelve-foot beam. To the two rooms, which the ordinary shanty boat contains, she had added another two, forming an oblong cabin, with four windows on each side and a flat roof. The flat roof formed the second deck of the prospective houseboat. It had a small railing around it, and a pair of steps that led up from the outside to the upper deck. Madge had decorated her fairy ship with garlands of flowers that hung far over the sides of the deck.

Jack Bolling looked at the drawing a long time without saying a word.

"Don't you think it can be done, Jack?" inquired Madge eagerly. "You see, this old boat could be cleaned and painted, and any good carpenter could put up the extra rooms."

"Right you are, Madge," Jack answered at last, making a low bow. "Hats off to the ladies, as usual. Who is that queer-looking customer coming this way?"

"He is the man who is to see about our canal boat," answered Phil, as though they were already in possession.

Madge had gone forward. "Have you found the boat for us?" she inquired. "I simply can't wait to find out."

The man grinned. "There is one towed alongside of mine that you might be able to git. I had a hard time finding it."

"That is all right," declared Jack, stepping forward, "you will be paid for your work. Will you please take us out to look at the boat?"

"Got to cross my shanty to git to it," the man replied, leading the way across a rickety gang-plank.

There were three or four dirty children playing on the deck of his boat and a thin, yellow dog. At the open door of the shanty kitchen stood the figure of a girl. She had on the faded calico dress of the day before; she was barefooted and her hair was ragged and unkempt. But as Jack Bolling and the four girls glanced idly at her a start of surprise ran through each one of them. Jack stopped for an instant, and instinctively took off his hat. Phil Alden whis-

pered in Madge's ear, "I never saw any one so beautiful in my life," and Madge mutely agreed.

The girl was smiling a wistful, far-away smile that was very touching. Her hair was the color of copper that has been burnished by the sun, and her eyes were the deep blue of the midsummer sky. The wind and sun had tanned the girl's cheeks, but her skin was still fine and delicate. There was a strange, vacant expression in her eyes and a pathetic droop to her whole figure.

"Git you back in there, Moll," the owner of the shanty boat called out roughly. The girl started and quivered, as though she expected a blow. Jack's face turned hot with anger. But what could he do? The man was talking to his own daughter.

"Why did you speak to the poor girl like that?" asked Madge sharply.

"She ain't all right in the top story," the man answered. "She is kind of foolish. I have to keep a close watch on her."

Madge turned pitying eyes on the demented girl, then as they stepped aboard the other canal boat, for the time she forgot the lovely apparition she had just seen.

"How much will the owner rent this boat for?" Madge asked at last, trying hard to conceal her enthusiasm. The boat was dirty and

needed renovating, but it was well built of good, strong timbers.

"My friend is willing to sell this here boat for a hundred dollars," said the fisherman, Mike Muldoon, hesitating as he mentioned the sum.

It was all Madge could do to keep from clapping her hands for joy. One hundred dollars for the boat—that left another hundred for painting and remodeling and for other necessary expenses.

Just as Madge was about to close with the man's offer a look from Jack Bolling interrupted her.

"The boat is not worth a hundred dollars," he declared decisively. "The young lady will give you fifty dollars for it, and not a cent more."

The man laughed contemptuously. "I can't do it," he said. "That boat is cheap at a hundred dollars."

"At fifty, you mean," retorted Jack stubbornly.

The girls stood back quietly and allowed Jack to drive the bargain, which he did with so much spirit that the coveted boat was at last made over to him at his price, fifty dollars.

For the rest of the day the four girls spent their time interviewing carpenters and painters. At last they found a man who promised to

deliver the boat, rebuilt according to Madge's idea, at a little town several miles farther down the bay. The man owned a motor boat. He was to take the houseboat to a landing, where the girls could load it with the necessary supplies, and then to tow them farther down the bay, until they found the ideal place for their summer holiday.

"I declare, Madge, dear, I was never so tired, nor so happy in my life," declared Eleanor Butler late that afternoon, as the quartette were on their way back to their school at Harborpoint. "I can see our houseboat, now, as plainly as anything. At first, Lillian and I couldn't quite believe in your idea."

Madge had heard Eleanor's comments but vaguely. She was doing a sum in mental arithmetic. "Fifty dollars for the old shanty boat, seventy-five for remodeling it, fifteen to the man for towing." Here she became confused. But she still knew there was quite a large sum of money left for buying the little furniture they needed and their store of provisions.

Phyllis Alden, too, had been busy calculating. "I think we can do it, Madge," she said, leaning over from the back seat to speak to her friend.

"Of course we can. We shall have whole lots of money," announced Madge triumphantly.

Phil shook her head. "I am afraid we won't. There is one thing we must buy that will be expensive."

Lillian straightened up. She had been leaning against the back of the seat, utterly worn out. The three girls gazed at Phil in consternation. What was this new item of expense that threatened to eat up their little capital?

"Don't keep us in suspense, Phil," laughed Eleanor. "What have we forgotten to buy?"

"A kitchen stove!" cried Phil dramatically. "And I know they must be awfully expensive."

"What a goose you are, Phil," said Lillian in a practical tone. "We don't want a kitchen stove. It would take up too much room. We need an oil stove or something like that."

"Then I appoint you as a special committee to look into the stove question, Lillian," laughed Madge.

"I accept the appointment," bowed Lillian, "and I won't waste our capital on kitchen ranges of elephantine proportions, either."

During the next five days the four friends found plenty to occupy their time. Then Miss Tolliver's school closed, and Phil Alden hurried home to her family in Hartford, Connecticut; Lillian returned to her home in Philadelphia, while Madge and Eleanor departed to spend a week with Mr. and Mrs. Butler in their old home

in Virginia. Miss Jones, however, remained at the school. She made one hurried trip into Baltimore, and on another occasion had a visitor, but the rest of the time she sewed industriously; for on June the eighth a new experience was to be hers—she was to begin her duties as chaperon to four adventurous girls aboard their longed-for "Ship of Dreams."

CHAPTER V

ALL ABOARD

BLUE waves lapped idly against the sides of a little, white palace that had risen out of the waves of the bay overnight. One side lay close along a quiet shore. Overhead the leaves of a willow tree stirred in the wind, and the birds twittered in its branches. The rosy flush was just fading out of the sky. Dawn had come only a short time before, and the wind, the waves and the birds were the only things stirring so early in the morning. There was not a sound or a movement aboard the odd vessel that was moored to the shore.

Along the shore sped the slender figure of a girl. It was a part of the morning. Her blue frock was the color of the sky and her auburn hair had been touched by the sun, and on her radiant face lay the glory of youth.

Of course, it was Madge! She did not stop when she first spied her houseboat between the branches of the willow tree. She gave a little gasp, and ran on faster than ever. A moment later she came alongside her boat, which was only about three feet from the shore. Madge had not practised running and jumping in the

gymnasium at school and on the old farm in Virginia for nothing. She gave one flying leap and landed on the deck of her houseboat. Then she stood perfectly still, a little song of gratitude welling from the depth of her happy heart.

"Perhaps it was not fair in me to have run away from Eleanor," she mused. "But then Nellie is such a sleepy-head, she never would have wished to get up so early. And I did want to see the boat alone, just for a moment. I am not going to look into the cabin, though. I am going to wait for the other girls——"

A stone went whizzing by Madge's ear at this moment, causing her soliloquy to come to an abrupt end.

She glanced toward the shore. A small boy stood grinning at her, with his hands tucked into a pair of trousers so much too long for him they had to be turned up from the ankles to the knees.

"Hello," he remarked cheerfully, eyeing Madge owlishly.

"Hello yourself," returned Madge. "Do you usually begin the day by throwing stones at peaceful strangers?"

"Yes'm," the small boy responded calmly. "Where'd you and that come from?"

"I came from my home in Virginia, and if by 'that' you mean my boat, it is a 'Ship of

Dreams' and was towed up here from Baltimore yesterday afternoon. What do you think of it?"

"She isn't a dream, she's a peach," was the prompt retort.

"I'm glad you like her," smiled Madge in a winning fashion that caused the lad to smile in return. "Why are you up so early in the morning?"

"Driving home the cows," was the laconic answer.

"I don't see any cows," teased Madge. "Wait a minute. I have something for you to do. Would you like to earn a quarter? If you would, then come back here about nine o'clock. We are going to load our boat with some furniture and provisions, and we would like to have you help us."

"All right, I'll be here," promised the boy, and ran off into the bushes with a derisive grin which Madge did not see.

A few moments later Madge went back to Eleanor to have breakfast at the little boarding house where she and her cousin had spent the night. Miss Jones, Lillian and Phil had not yet arrived, but they were expected by the early train that came from Baltimore. The little village from which they intended to go aboard their houseboat was only about half an hour's

ride from the city, and was situated on one of the quiet inlets of the bay.

Fifteen minutes before the train was due Eleanor and Madge were impatiently waiting at the station. The newcomers were so surrounded by bags, suit cases and mysterious packages that it took all the men about the depot to land them safely on the platform. Madge gave the order to the expressman to bring all their luggage to the houseboat landing near the willow tree. Then the party started out to find the boat, without losing a minute by the way.

Madge slipped her arm through that of Miss Jones and walked beside her dutifully, though she secretly longed to be with her chums. Lillian, Phil and Eleanor joined hands and ran ahead, without being in the least degree affected by the idea that they were no longer children. Madge, however, was the only one who knew the way. She hurried Miss Jones along until that young woman was almost out of breath. When they were within a short distance of the place where she had found her boat waiting for her in the early morning, she could bear it no longer. With a murmured excuse she broke away from Miss Jones and started on a run toward the willow tree. Her three chums were close behind her. The branches of the willow

tree seemed more impenetrable in the bright sunlight. It was not so easy to see through them. Madge ran straight past the tree, then uttered a shrill cry. She stopped short, her cheeks turning first red, then white.

"What is it?" cried Phil, springing to her friend's side.

Madge pointed dumbly toward the water.

"Tell us!" said Eleanor, running up to Madge and lightly grasping her arm.

"Our houseboat is gone!" gasped Madge. "It was right there, tied to that very post along the shore early this morning! The man who brought it down from Baltimore left a note for me describing the landing place. He said he had to go back to Baltimore, but that he would come here this afternoon to tow us. Now the boat has gone! O, girls, what shall we do?"

The girls stared at the water in silence. Disappointment rendered them speechless for the moment. "Let us look up and down the shore," suggested Phil comfortingly. "I suppose it is just barely possible that the rope broke away from the stake, and the boat has floated off somewhere."

The four girls ran up and down the bank, straining their eyes in anxious glances out over the wide stretch of water. There was no houseboat in sight. It had vanished as completely

as though it had really been a "Ship of Dreams."

"Perhaps you have made a mistake in the place, Madge," was the chaperon's first remark as she joined the excited party.

Madge compressed her red lips. Miss Jones was so provoking. She was utterly without tact. But now that she was to be one of the party it would be wrong to say a single impolite thing to their chaperon the whole six weeks of their holiday, no matter how provoking or tactless she might be. Madge sighed impatiently, then turned to the teacher.

"No, I am not mistaken, Miss Jones. I can't be. You see, I came to this very spot this morning and went aboard our boat. Then I have the man's description of the landing place. I think we had better go back to the village and see if we can get some men who know the shore along here to come to help us look out for our boat. There is no use in having our furniture brought here if we haven't any houseboat," finished Madge, her voice trembling.

"Come along, then; I will go back with you," volunteered Phil. "Miss Jones, you sit under the tree. Lillian, you and Nellie keep a sharp look-out. If any one comes along in a boat, ask him about ours."

"Do you think our boat has gone forever,

Phil?" asked Madge dejectedly as the two companions walked wearily back over the road they had traveled so gayly a short time before.

"I don't know," replied Phil. "I should say it depended entirely upon who had taken the trouble to spirit it away."

While the two girls stood gazing moodily out over the bay a hard, green apple landed with a thump on top of Madge's uncovered head. Madge and Phil looked up simultaneously. There in a gnarled old apple tree directly above them appeared the grinning face of the small boy whose acquaintance Madge had made earlier in the morning.

"Lost your boat, ain't you?" he asked cheerfully.

Madge nodded and walked on. She was not anxious to renew conversation with the mischievous youngster.

Phil, however, was seized with an inspiration. "Have you been about this place very long?" she inquired casually.

"Yep," the boy returned.

"Then, perhaps, you know what has become of our boat," suggested Phil.

"Yep," answered the voice from the tree, "I know all about it."

"Then tell us this minute what has become of it!" ordered Madge. "I knew the moment I

saw you that you were the very imp of mischief. Tell us where our boat is at once."

"I won't tell," the urchin spoke firmly.

"You shall," declared Madge, her eyes flashing.

"I'd like to see you make me tell," dared the boy. "A girl can't climb a tree." The grin on his impish face widened.

"I'll show you that a girl *can* climb a tree, young man," exclaimed Madge hotly, making her way toward the tree. "I have climbed a good many more trees than you have ever climbed in your life."

"Listen to me, Madge," admonished Phil, laughing at her friend, "you can't have a fight with a small boy in the top of a tree or shake him out of it. Don't allow him to tease you. Let's go on into the village and get a policeman. Then, if the boy really knows anything about the disappearance of our houseboat, the policeman will make him tell us." Phil tried to make her voice sound as threatening as possible when she mentioned the word "policeman."

"I won't be here when you git back," was the imp's cheerful response.

Madge and Phil paid no further heed to him. They went on toward the town. A few yards farther on they heard the patter of bare feet. "Can't you wait a minute?" a voice pleaded.

"I was only teasing you. If you promise you won't give me away, I'll tell you what became of your old boat. My pa took it."

"Your pa?" cried Madge in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"When I told Pa I'd seen a new-fangled kind of a boat hitched to our post, where we most generally ties up our own boat, he said you hadn't no right to be there. So he just hitched up our mule and he come down here and untied your boat and dragged it up shore. I run after him until I got too tired. Then I come back here to tell you," ended the boy.

"Where is your father?" Phil asked quietly. Madge's eyes were flashing dangerously, her temper was rising.

"He's cutting hay," the boy returned. "I'll show you the field and then I'll run."

Lillian and Eleanor had now joined the two girls to find out what was delaying them. Miss Jones still waited, disconsolate, under the willow tree. The four girls started out behind the one small boy, who answered to the name of Bill Jenkins, Jr. It was evident that Bill Jenkins, Sr., was the name of the boat-thief.

"What shall we say and do when we find the man?" asked Eleanor anxiously. "I suppose we had no right to tie our boat up at his landing place without asking permission."

Madge shook her head angrily. "Right or no right, I shall certainly tell him my opinion of him," she said tensely.

"You must not make the man angry, Madge," argued gentle Eleanor, who knew Madge's fiery temper and stood in awe of it. "Perhaps, when he sees we are girls, he will be sorry he took our boat away and will bring it back for us."

"Let us go and see him at once," was Madge's sole response.

After all, it was Eleanor's gentleness that won the day! She told the farmer, whom they found in the hay field, the whole story of the houseboat, and how they hoped to spend their holiday aboard it.

"I declare, I'm real sorry I moved your houseboat," he apologized. "If I'd 'a' known the pretty toy boat belonged to a parcel of young girls like you, I'd never have laid hands on it. You kin stay along my shore all summer if you like. But no one asked my permission to tie the boat to my post. And soon as I seen it, I just thought the boat belonged to some rich society folks who thought they owned the airth. I hid the boat up the bay a piece. But don't you fret. I'll go git it and tote it back in no time."

"I am so sorry," explained Madge prettily, ashamed of her bad temper and how near she

had come to displaying it. "I thought, of course, the engineer who towed our boat out here from Baltimore had asked your permission before he made a landing. I suppose he was in such a hurry to get back to the city that he neglected it."

While the girls and their chaperon waited for the return of their houseboat they ate an early luncheon out of the hampers that Phil and Lillian had brought from their homes to provision the travelers for the day.

The houseboat finally did appear, much as the girls had pictured her. She was painted white, with a line of green showing just above the water. The four rooms in the cabin, which was set well toward the stern, opened into each other, and each room had a small door and window facing on the deck. The two bedrooms had six berths set along the walls. One room was intended for the kitchen and the fourth, which was the largest, was to serve as the dining room, sitting room, work and play room for the houseboat party on rainy days, when it was impossible for them to be out on deck.

While the men were unloading the barrels and boxes on the boat the girls ran in and out the doors of their cabin rooms like the figures in a pantomime, bumping into each other and stumbling over things. Miss Jones at last sent

Eleanor and Lillian to the kitchen to drive nails along the wall and to hang up their limited display of kitchen utensils, while Phil and Madge helped with the unpacking. There was one steamer chair, bought in honor of the chaperon, and a great many sofa cushions, borrowed from their rooms at school, to be used as deck furniture. A barrel of apples, a barrel of potatoes and two Virginia hams were donations from the farm in Virginia. Mrs. Seldon, Lillian's mother, had also sent a store of pickles and preserves.

Phil, too, had brought a big box from home, while Madge's own purchases for the houseboat included a small table, five chairs, besides the necessary china and some of the bedding. The rest of the outfit the girls managed to secure from their own homes.

Miss Jones, Phil and Madge were industriously turning the berths into beds when a sharp scream from Lillian, who was working in the kitchen, filled them with terror. Miss Jones arrived first at the kitchen door, with her heart in her mouth. Had some horrible disaster overtaken them, just as they were about to start on their adventures? There stood the two girls, Lillian and Eleanor, their faces, instead of showing fright, apparently shining with delight. The men who had been setting up the lit-

tle stove, which they had bought for a trifling sum after all, had disappeared. The girls were now in full possession of their domain.

"What is it, children? What has happened?" implored Miss Jones, with a white, scared face. Lillian pointed ahead of her, but only the kitchen stove was to be seen. Madge and Phil, who had followed close behind their chaperon, were equally mystified.

But hark! What was the noise they heard all at once? A gentle crackling, a roar, a burst of flame, and a puff of smoke up through the long stove pipe! The pipe went through a hole cut in the side of the wall. "A fire, a fire!" exclaimed Lillian joyously, wondering why the others looked so startled.

There was really a fire burning in the stove of the houseboat kitchen! And as a fire is a first sign to the pioneer that he is at last at home, so the little company felt themselves to be the original girl pioneers in houseboat adventures, and felt the same thrill of peace and pleasure.

Madge seized the shining new tea-kettle and filled it with water from the big bucket that rested on a shelf just outside the kitchen door.

"Madge, put the kettle on,
Madge, put the kettle on,
We'll all take tea,"

she sang in a sweet, high, rapturous voice.

Toot, toot, toot! a motor boat whistle sounded out on the water. The four girls rushed on deck to call a greeting to the engineer who was to tow their houseboat down the bay, until it found an anchorage in a cove in the bay near a stream of clear water.

Four weary but happy girls sat out on deck on cushions as the engineer made fast to their boat preparatory to starting. The chaperon was installed in the solitary grandeur of their one steamer chair.

There was a heavy tug at the great rope that bound the houseboat to the little motor tug. The motor boat moved out into the bay, and with almost no perceptible motion and no noise, except the gentle ripple of the water purling against the sides of the craft, the houseboat followed it. The longed-for vacation on the water had begun.

CHAPTER VI

PLEASURE BAY

JUST before twilight the boat reached a spot that seemed especially created for the travelers. For two hours they had been silently drinking in the beauty of the sun-lit bay and the green earth. They were not in the main body of the great Chesapeake Bay, but in one of the long arms of the bay that reaches into the Maryland coast.

"Look ahead of you, girls, to the left," called Phyllis Alden, as they glided slowly along.

Miss Jones and the three girls looked. There, in a curve of the land, was a low bank, with great clusters of purple iris growing along it, among the slender, long, green stems of the "cat-tails." An elm tree stood close to the edge of the water, spreading its branches out over the miniature sea. It was so strong, so big and enduring that it gave the home-seeking girls a sense of protection. The elm's branches could shelter them from the sun by day, and at night their boat could be tied to its trunk. Farther up the bank the girls could see a comfortable old, gray, shingled farmhouse. The farm meant water, fresh eggs, milk and butter.

Madge looked inquiringly at their chaperon, who nodded with an expression of entire satisfaction. Next, Madge glanced about the semicircle of eager faces. "Shall we cast our anchor in Pleasure Bay?" she asked, and thus the pleasant little inland sea was named.

Madge signaled to the motor boat ahead, and the engineer stopped. He had several passengers on board his motor boat, but the men had been inside the saloon most of the time, and no one on board the houseboat had noticed them.

Before the houseboat anchored Madge and Phil ran up the hill to ask at the farmhouse for the privilege of making a landing. They had learned a lesson they were not likely to forget.

Too tired to begin work, the girls ate their supper out of the luncheon baskets, then sat about on deck, singing and talking until the stars came out and twinkled down on their little houseboat with a million friendly eyes; then, urged by their chaperon and their own heavy eyes, they crept into their berths.

It was still night when Madge awakened with a start. She thought she heard some one talking. "To whit! to whoo!" It was only the call of a friendly owl. Yet the night seemed curiously lonely. It was strange to be asleep on the water instead of on the land! There was another

weird sound, then something stirred outside on the deck of the boat. From her cabin window Madge could see the line of the shore. It was quiet and empty.

This time she heard the sound of a voice. Another voice answered it. Could it be possible that the second voice sounded like that of Miss Jones! What could have happened? Without pausing to put on her shoes Madge slipped into the next room. Eleanor lay breathing quietly in the upper berth and Miss Jones seemed to be asleep in the lower one. But the cover was drawn up almost to where her ears should be and Madge could not see her face.

She crept over to the chaperon's berth. It was necessary to waken Miss Jones and tell her of the mysterious sounds. She slipped her hand along the pillow in the dark. There was no response. She groped deeper under the covers. Still no movement or sound. Miss Jones was not in her berth. She was out on deck, talking to some one. Madge returned to her room. She did not intend to call the other girls until she knew what was the trouble. Phyllis was always brave and so were Lillian and Eleanor, but in this instance they could do nothing.

The girl stole softly to the cabin window and peeped out. She could just catch the outline of two figures that were standing well up toward

the bow of the boat. One was a woman's figure, with a shawl thrown over her head, but Madge was sure that she recognized the chaperon. Hurrying back to her berth she slipped on her steamer coat and slippers. She was trying every moment to fight down the distrust and dislike she had felt toward Miss Jones ever since their first acquaintance. She was trying to tell herself that she had invited their teacher to act as their chaperon from other motives, as well as from sympathy. But the finger of suspicion seemed to point plainly toward the teacher.

Madge walked quietly, and without any fear or hesitation, out on the deck of the houseboat, straight toward the two shrouded figures in the bow. Neither of them heard her coming, but she heard Miss Jones's distressed plea: "Won't you go away, and never come here again. I tell you, I can not do it. I simply can't——"

"Miss Jones," Madge's voice, clear and cold, sounded almost in her chaperon's ear.

The young woman turned so white that Madge could see her pallor in the moonlight.

The figure with her was shrouded in a long, black coat which was pulled up about its face. At the first sound of Madge's voice it made for the extreme end of the boat. With a quick turn, Madge ran after the escaping form. As it poised

itself for a leap toward the shore, Madge caught at the cloak and dragged it away from the face, and for a brief instant she saw the face of a boy, a little older perhaps than she was. It was a wild and elfish face, while a pair of ears, ending almost in points, stuck up through the masses of thick, curly hair that covered his head. But before she could get a distinct impression of his face the young man was gone, racing up the low embankment with great leaps, like a hunted deer.

Madge turned to their chaperon, waiting for the latter to offer some explanation. Miss Jones said nothing, but regarded Madge with distressed eyes.

"Who was your visitor? I did not know that any one knew we were anchored here. We did not know, ourselves, that we were to land here until we spied the place. Was that boy a stranger to you? Why didn't you call one of us if he frightened you?" Madge's tone was distinctly unfriendly.

Miss Jones only shook her head. Big tears were rolling down her cheeks. She was trembling so that Madge, much against her will, took her by the arm and assisted her across the deck.

"I can tell you nothing, Madge," was the teacher's husky reply. "I am perfectly aware that you have a right to know. Still, I simply

can't tell you. But I can go away, if you like, and I will, as soon as you can get some one else to chaperon you. Only I must ask you not to tell the other girls what has happened to-night, or why I must leave you. You see, dear," Miss Jones ended wistfully, "the other girls are fond of me. You never have been. I can not bear to lose their faith and trust."

There was a significant silence after this remark.

"Did you really see who it was with me?" Miss Jones questioned anxiously. "Would you know the face if you saw it again?"

"I don't know," was Madge's stiff reply, "but I believe I should."

"Won't you promise me that you will not tell the other girls?" Miss Jones whispered, as they crossed the deck and came to the door of their little cabin. "I am not asking you to do anything wrong, only asking you to trust me and believe that I do not think I am doing a wrong by not taking you into my confidence."

"Very well, I will keep your secret," returned Madge slowly. "I do not wish you to leave us, Miss Jones. I wish you to stay and take care of us, just as you planned to do."

"You are only saying that, dear, because you know I have no other place to go for my holiday, and you are afraid my health will suffer.

You must not think of my health. I can not stay with you just for my own sake."

"Then stay for ours," said Madge shortly, and without further words she went into the cabin and climbed into her berth.

Sleep was far from weighing down her eyelids. She lay awake for some time, wondering why clouds and distrust should so often spring up among human beings when everything seemed arranged for their perfect happiness.

She generously made up her mind, however, never to trouble their chaperon with questions about her mysterious visitor, but she determined to discover for herself who that boy was, and whether he had come aboard the boat to rob them.

CHAPTER VII

THE UNKNOWN JAILER

"MADGE MORTON, what do you mean by sleeping until seven o'clock, the first morning we are on our houseboat?" cried Phil, poking her head in the cabin door. "I would have awakened you before now, only Miss Jones would not let me. Lillian and Eleanor have been waiting for you in their bathing suits for a long while. Do let's have a salt water plunge before breakfast."

Springing from her berth, Madge made a dash for her bathing suit, which she had laid out the night before.

The girls were over the side of the boat in a hurry, swimming about in the water with gleeful shouts. The odor of frying bacon, which was presently wafted to their nostrils from the door of the houseboat kitchen, was something the bathers were too hungry to resist, and with one accord they swam toward their boat.

It had been arranged that Miss Jones was to get the breakfast, Lillian and Eleanor the luncheon, and Phil and Madge, who were the most ambitious of the cooks, though not the most proficient, were to cook the dinner.

Madge noticed that Miss Jones looked whiter than usual, but the other girls saw no difference in their chaperon as they clambered up over the side of the boat to get ready for breakfast.

"Girls," Miss Jones remarked, as she put down a big plate of corn muffins before her hungry charges, "Phil accused me once of being mysterious and never talking about myself. Well, I am going to make a confession about myself at once."

Madge raised her eyes in surprise. After all, was Miss Jones going to tell of last night's adventure? But the chaperon was not looking at her. She was smiling at Phil, Lillian and Eleanor.

"Well, out with it, Miss Jones," laughed Phil. "What is the confession?"

"It is a foolish one, perhaps. I hate the name of 'Jones.' I have despised it all my life. There, that is my confession. Won't you girls please call me something else while we are having our holiday together? I know Madge can find a name for me." She looked rather timidly at Madge.

The girl blushed, though she felt vastly relieved at Miss Jones's confession. "What do you wish us to call you? I saw your initials in some of your books, 'J. A. Jones,' so we might call you Jenny Ann Jones, because, when Nellie

and I were children, we used to play an old nursery game: 'We're going to see Miss Jenny Ann Jones, Miss Jenny Ann Jones, and how is she to-day?' " Madge's explanation ended with a song.

Miss Jones laughed. "My name is worse than Jenny Ann, it is Jemima Ann."

"It isn't pretty," agreed Phyllis, with a shake of the head. "Girls, what shall we call our chaperon? And we have never named our houseboat, either. We have a day's work ahead of us. We must think of names for both of them."

"Wouldn't 'Miss Ann' do?" Eleanor asked. "I think Ann is such a pretty name."

"I would rather you had a more individual name for me. I have often been called Ann."

"You might be the 'Queen of our Ship of Dreams,' " laughed Lillian.

"That sounds altogether too high and mighty," objected Phyllis. "We ought to have something nice and chummy."

"We might call you 'Gem,' because it is short for Jemima, and in honor of these corn muffins, which we call 'gems' in our part of the world," added Phil. "We'll think of a name yet. Come on, girls, we must get to work; there is so much to be done. Lillian, you and I must go up to the farmhouse to get some supplies this morning.

Suppose we take a long walk this afternoon and explore the woods back of us?"

"We will think of the prettiest name we can for you and another for our houseboat," declared Lillian as the four girls rose from the table to go about their various tasks; "then we shall make our report to-night."

It was nearly four o'clock in the afternoon when the four chums started on their walk. Miss Jones did not go with them. She was tired and wished to sit out on the deck of the boat in the sunshine.

"Be back before dark, children," she called out gayly as the girls climbed up the little embankment. "Remember, you don't know your way in this country, as you do at old Harborpoint. I shall be uneasy about you if you aren't back on time."

There were several scattered farmhouses at the top of the hill that sloped down to the cove of the bay, but back of the farmlands lay a long stretch of forest. The ground was covered with a carpet of wild flowers and a few late violets.

Once the chums were fairly in the heart of the woods they did not meet another traveler. They seemed to have the forest to themselves. They had no thought of danger in the quiet woods, and Madge and Eleanor, who had been

brought up in the country, were careful to watch the paths they followed.

They had been in the woods for an hour or more when Lillian, who was stooping over a clump of big, purple violets, thought she heard a peculiar sound resembling light footsteps. Whether there was a human being or an animal near them she could not tell. The footsteps would run rapidly and then stop abruptly.

"Phil," called Lillian, "I thought I heard something. Did you? Listen once more. There, did you hear that?"

Phil listened. "Not a sound, Airy Fairy Lillian. It must have been your fancy."

But Lillian was not convinced. Several times she believed she heard the noise again. However, she did not mention it.

As the girls came out of the woods to a little clearing Phil, who was in the lead, ran forward. "Madge, Eleanor," she called, "come here, quick! I am sure this must be a regular, old-time log cabin."

Before them the girls saw an old cabin that looked as though it had been empty for a quarter of a century. It was strongly built of logs, and the chinks between the logs were filled with mud that had hardened like plaster. There were no windows in the cabin, except in the eaves. The heavy door was half open, but it

had an old-fashioned wooden latch on the outside.

"The old cabin looks rather creepy, doesn't it, Madge?" asked Eleanor. "It is built more securely than our cabins farther down south, too. This place seems more like a prison."

"It looks interesting. Let's go in to see it," Phil suggested.

The cabin stood in front of a stream of clear water. Close around it grew a number of dark old cedar trees.

Phil and Madge shoved open the heavy door. Inside, the one large room looked gray and dark, as the only light came from the two small windows so far overhead.

"I would rather not go in, Madge," protested Eleanor, hesitating on the threshold after Lillian had followed the other two girls inside.

"Don't be a baby, Eleanor," scolded Madge. "There is nothing to hurt you."

Once inside the old house, Eleanor was as much interested as her chums. There was no furniture in the place, but a few faded pictures were tacked up on the walls, and the corners of the room were thick with mysterious and inviting shadows.

As they clustered in a group under an old magazine picture of a darkey with a fiddle in his hand there was an unexpected sound just out-

side the door, and the big room grew suddenly darker.

The four girls turned simultaneously.

The heavy door through which they had entered the cabin, and which was the only entrance, had been shut fast. At the same instant there was the sound of a heavy, sliding bolt, then the rush of flying feet.

For the moment no one of the girls realized the seriousness of what had happened.

"Some one must have locked us in for a joke," declared Phil stoutly.

Madge ran to the door and shook it with all her strength. It was built of heavy logs, and, though the girls could see the daylight through the cracks between the timbers, the door showed no sign of opening.

"Don't work so hard, Madge," remonstrated Phil. "Whoever shut us in will come back in a moment to unfasten the bolt."

The girls waited a long time. No one returned.

"Perhaps the person who closed the door did not know there was any one in the cabin," suggested Eleanor faintly.

"But we were all talking, Nellie. No one but a deaf person could have failed to hear us," Lillian insisted.

Eleanor realized the truth of the words.

"Don't be frightened, Nellie," begged Madge remorsefully. "Let's all push against the door at the same time. I am sure we shall be able to break the bolt. One, two, three! Now—all together!"

The four girls shoved with all their might, until their arms ached and their faces perspired from the exertion. Still the old door resisted them. Perhaps Eleanor was right and the log house had been built as a prison.

"I think we had better call for help," was Phil's practical suggestion. "If we all scream together, we ought to make considerable noise. I am afraid Miss Jones may become worried about us before any one comes to let us out."

The girls called and called, until their voices were hoarse, but no one answered them. Each girl remembered that she had not met a single person in her journey through the woods.

Then the prisoners made a trip around the big room, poking and peering about to see if there were any other possible method of escape.

"If I could only get up to one of those windows, I could easily break the bars and try to jump out of it," speculated Madge aloud. "But, alas, I am not a monkey! I can't climb straight up the side of a wall."

"You shall not try it, either," retorted Eleanor determinedly. "You would break your

neck if you tried to jump from one of those high windows. Thank goodness, you can't climb up to them!"

"You were the wise one, Nell, and we wouldn't listen to you." Madge eyed Eleanor mournfully. She had an overwhelming desire to burst into tears.

"Don't take it so to heart, Madge," comforted her cousin. "Some one is sure to come this way finally, if we only call long enough."

But the afternoon shadows lengthened and no one came. Gradually the twilight fell, enveloping the big, bare room in hazy darkness. The prisoners huddled together with white and weary faces. They thought of their cosy houseboat with the little lamps lit in the dining room, and the big lantern hanging in the bow, and of Miss Jones, who by this time was no doubt anxiously waiting and watching for their return.

It was perhaps eight o'clock, although to the girls it seemed midnight, when Lillian whispered:

"Girls, I hear some one coming this way. Phil was right; it was a joke, after all. Whoever locked the door has come back to unlock it."

The girls smiled hopefully. After all, their experience did not amount to anything. They

would be back inside the houseboat in another hour.

The footsteps now sounded plainly just outside the cabin door.

"Won't you please unbar the door for us?" called Phil and Madge in chorus. "Some one has locked us inside."

An elfish laugh answered them. Or was it the wind? Perhaps they had heard no one after all. They strained their ears but heard no further sound. Then the last bit of twilight vanished and night came down in reality.

CHAPTER VIII

AN ANXIOUS NIGHT

HUDDLED together in the darkness, Phil and Madge endeavored to relieve the strain of the situation by talking, but the very sound of their voices dismayed them and they became silent. Finally Eleanor, who had been leaning against Madge's shoulder, laid her head in her cousin's lap and went to sleep. A little later Lillian, after receiving Madge's assurance that she and Phil intended to keep watch, went to sleep also.

"Madge," Phil's voice trembled a little, "what do you suppose poor Miss Jones will think? She won't have the least idea in which direction to look for us. Goodness knows how long we may have to stay here. We may never get out." Her voice sank to a whisper.

"Why, Phil," Madge feigned a hopefulness which she did not feel, "I am surprised at you. You haven't given up hope. It is just the darkness and being hungry that makes things appear so dreadful. I have been thinking about our plight, and when daylight comes I am going to try to climb up the wall to the window. The mud has broken away between some of the logs,

so that I can get my foot in the opening. We shall have to dig it away in other places too."

"But what can we dig with, Madge? We haven't a knife."

"With our fingers and hairpins, if we must, Phil. Sh-sh, Nellie is waking. I want her to sleep on till daylight."

Toward morning, however, the two girls' eyes closed wearily. In spite of their resolve to keep awake, the gray dawn creeping in at the windows found them fast asleep. It was Phil who first opened her eyes. She touched Madge, who sat up with a start, then springing to her feet exclaimed, "I'm so glad it's morning. Now for my great circus stunt."

"You can't possibly climb up there without hurting yourself, Madge. You will surely fall," expostulated Eleanor. "Please, please don't try it."

"Please don't discourage me,. Nellie. It is the only way I know to get out of this dreadful place. Phil, if you will try to brace me, I can climb up and dig in the mud farther up."

Eleanor was feeling down in her pocket. Suddenly she gave a little cry of surprise. "O, girls! I have something that may help. Here is a little pair of scissors. You can dig with them, Madge."

The girls hailed the scissors with exclama-

tions of joy. They were very small embroidery scissors, but they were better than nothing.

Lillian, who was bent on a foraging expedition around the room, came back a moment later with a few big, rusty nails and an old brick she had picked up out of the tumbled down fireplace. "If you can hammer these nails in the wall, Madge, you will have something to hold on to as you climb."

For two hours Madge alternately dug and climbed. In each hole that she made between the big logs she would set her foot, then hammer a nail above her head and dig a new opening. At last she actually did climb up the side of the wall, but her hands were scratched and bleeding, and her hair and face were covered with mud. She had taken off her dress skirt, too, as she could climb better in her petticoat.

The three girls below held their breath when she came to the final stretch, and let go the last rickety nail to fling herself on to the window sill.

"Eureka, girls!" she called down cheerfully, when she got her breath. She was holding tightly to the window frame with both hands and endeavoring to make her voice sound gay, though she was nearly worn out with the fatigue of her dangerous climb. "Now I shall surely find a way out for us. Please don't be fright-

ened, Nellie, darling, if I have to jump. It is not so bad." She gave a little inward shudder as she looked through the tiny window frame. She could easily wrench the broken bars away. That was not the trouble. But the window was so small and the sill so narrow that Madge realized she could not get into the proper position for a forward spring. However, she had made up her mind; she might break her leg, or her arm, but she would open that barred door if she died in doing it.

With determined hands she wrenched at one of the window bars. It gave way. She seized hold of another, clinging to the sill with her other hand, her feet in their insecure resting places.

"It's all right, chilluns," she smiled, as she swung herself up to the window, "I'm going to jump."

Eleanor had closed her eyes. Phil and Lillian watched their friend, sick with apprehension.

Madge gave one look down at the ground, at least fourteen feet below her. Then she uttered a quick, sharp cry, and dropped back to her resting place, her feet, almost by instinct, finding the open spaces in the wall.

"Come down, Madge," called Phil sharply. "I was afraid you'd find the distance too great. Don't try it again."

"No, no, it is not that," replied Madge, gazing through the window. "I don't believe I shall have to jump. I am sure some one is near."

Sniffing the ground, near the side of the cabin, she had spied a dog with a soft brown nose, a shaggy, red brown body and a tail standing out tense and straight. It was a brown setter, and Madge knew he was probably hunting for woodchucks. Surely the presence of the dog meant a master somewhere near.

Her tired, eager eyes strained through the thick foliage of the woods they had traversed so happily only the afternoon before.

Yes, there was a man's figure! He was coming nearer. A young man in a hunting jacket, with a gun swung over his shoulder, was tramping along, with his eyes on the ground.

A pleading voice apparently came from the sky: "Please unbar the door of this old cabin. We are locked inside."

The young man stopped short. He took off his cap and ran his hand through his thick, light hair. He was too old to believe in fairies or elves. But he heard the voice again even more distinctly. "Oh, don't go away! Do open the log cabin door."

The young man looked up. There was a little, white face as wan and pale as the early day-

light, with an aureole of dark red curls around it, staring at him through the broken window frame of the old log cabin that he had seen deserted a dozen times in his hunting trips through these woods.

"If there is some one really calling to me, please wave your hand three times from that window, so I will know you are not a spook," called the young man, "otherwise I may be afraid to open the door."

"I can't wave. I shall fall if I let go the window sill," answered Madge, trying to keep from bursting into tears. "Please don't wait any longer. We have been locked in all night."

The stranger drew back the heavy wooden bolt. He started when he saw three white-faced girls staring at him. But the face he had seen at the window was not among them. Clinging to the old window frame, her slender feet stuck in the cracks between the logs, was the witch who had summoned him to their rescue.

"Won't you please come help me down, Phil?" asked a plaintive voice.

"Just let go the window frame and drop," ordered the stranger quietly. "Don't be afraid. It is the only possible way."

Without hesitating Madge did as directed. "Thank you," she said coolly, when she got her

breath. Then she staggered a little, and Phyllis and the young man who had come to their rescue caught her.

"We have been locked in so long," explained Phil. "No, we have not the least idea who could have played such a trick on us. We arrived in this neighborhood only yesterday afternoon."

Phil gave a short history of the houseboat, introducing her three friends and herself to him. "We must return to our chaperon at once," she added. "The poor woman will be dreadfully worried. Do you girls feel strong enough to walk? You see"—this time Phil turned to their rescuer—"it is not only that we have been shut up here for nearly fourteen hours, we are so hungry! We have had nothing to eat since yesterday at luncheon."

"Your poor, starving girls!" exclaimed their liberator, reproachfully. "At last I am convinced you are not fairies. And for once I am glad that my mother is always certain that I am on the point of starving."

He reached back into his pocket and brought out a package and a flask. "Here is some good, strong coffee. I am sorry it is cold, but it is better than nothing." He turned to Madge, who looked exhausted.

She shook her head, though she gazed at the

flask wistfully. "I won't drink first. I don't need it as much as the other girls."

Eleanor took the bottle from his hands and held it to Madge's lips. The exhausted girl took a long drink. Then the others followed suit, while the young man watched them, smiling with satisfaction. He was tall and strong, and not particularly handsome, but he had fine brown eyes, a firm chin and thick, curly, light hair. After the girls had finished the coffee he broke open his package of sandwiches and found exactly four inside.

"Please take them," he urged, handing the open package to Lillian.

"We mustn't take them from you," protested Lillian. "We thank you for the coffee. That will do nicely until we get back to our boat."

The stranger laughed. "See here," he protested, "not an hour ago, when I left the hotel, where my mother and I are spending the summer, I ate three eggs, much bacon, four Maryland biscuit and drank two cups of coffee. Fragile creature that I am, I believe I can exist on that amount of refreshment for another hour or so. But whenever I go out on a few hours' hunting trip, my mother insists that the steward at the hotel put me up a luncheon. She is forever imagining that I am likely to get lost and starve, a modern 'Babe in the Woods,' you

know. By the way, I haven't introduced myself. My name is Curtis, Thomas Stevenson Curtis, if you please, but I am more used to plain, everyday Tom."

The girls acknowledged the introduction, then by common consent they began walking away from the cabin.

A short distance was traversed in silence, then Madge said abruptly, "Who do you suppose locked us in, Mr. Curtis?"

"I don't know," answered Tom Curtis darkly, clenching his fist. "But wouldn't I like to find out! Have you an enemy about here?"

Madge shook her head. "No; as I said, we came to the neighborhood only yesterday. We have met only the farmer and his wife, who allowed us to land."

"I'll make it my business to find out who served you such a dastardly trick, Miss Morton," Tom returned. "I expect to be in this neighborhood all summer. My mother isn't very well, and we like this quiet place. Our home is in New York. I was a freshman last year at Columbia."

Only the day before Tom Curtis had informed his mother that he found the neighborhood too slow, and that if she didn't object he would be glad to move on. But a great deal can happen

in a short time to make a young man of twenty change his mind.

"Thank you," replied Madge sedately. "I'll be on the lookout for the wretch, too. Now we must hurry back to our chaperon, Miss Jones. I won't ask you to come with us this morning, but we shall be very glad to have you come aboard our boat to-morrow. We haven't named her yet, but she is so white and clean and new looking that you can't possibly mistake her. She is lying on an arm of the bay just south of these woods."

"I'll surely avail myself of the invitation," smiled Tom Curtis as they paused for a moment at the edge of the woods. Below them the blue waters of the bay gleamed in the sunshine. And yes, there was their beloved "Ship of Dreams."

"Oh, you can see her from here!" exclaimed Madge, her eyes dancing with the pride of possession. "See, Mr. Curtis, it is our very own 'Ship of Dreams' until we give her a real name."

"She's a beauty," said Tom Curtis warmly, "and I really must have a closer look at her."

"Then come to see us soon," invited Phil audaciously.

"I will, you may be certain of it. Good-bye. I hope you won't suffer any bad effects from

your strenuous night." The young man raised his cap and, whistling to his dog, strode off down the hill.

"What a nice boy," commented Lillian.

Madge, however, was not thinking of Tom Curtis; her mind dwelt upon their chaperon, and the long, anxious night she had spent alone on the houseboat.

Poor Miss Jones! Her vigil had indeed been a patient one. From the time the hands of the little cabin clock had pointed to the hour of six she had anxiously awaited the girls. She had cooked the dinner, then set it in the oven to warm. At seven o'clock she trudged up the hill to the farmhouse to make inquiries. No one had seen the young women since they passed through the fields early that afternoon. At nine o'clock a party of farmers scoured the country side, but the extreme darkness of the night had caused the young men to discontinue their search until daylight.

At dawn Miss Jones flung herself down on her berth, utterly exhausted. She would rest until the search party started out again, then she would hurry to the nearest town and inform the authorities of the strange disappearance of the girls. As she lay with half-closed eyes trying to imagine just what could possibly have happened to her charges, a familiar call broke upon

her ears that caused her to spring up from her berth in wonder.

"We've come to see Miss Jennie Ann Jones," caroled a voice, and in the next instant the bewildered teacher was surrounded by four tired but smiling girls.

"We were locked up all night in a log cabin in the woods," began Madge. "Do say you are glad to see us and give us some breakfast, Miss Jennie Ann Jones, for we were never so hungry in all our lives before, and as soon as we have something to eat, we'll tell you the strangest story you ever heard."

With her arm thrown across the teacher's shoulders Madge made her way to the houseboat, followed by her friends. At that moment, to the little, impulsive girl, Miss Jennie Ann Jones seemed particularly dear, in spite of her mysterious ways, and Madge made mental resolve to try to believe in their chaperon, no matter what happened.

CHAPTER IX

THE GIRL ON THE ISLAND

"PHIL, it looks like only a little more than half a mile over to the island. Do you think we can make it?" asked Madge, casting speculative eyes toward the distant island.

"Of course we can," declared Phyllis. "I'm sorry that Eleanor and Miss Jones did not come with us. But they have become so domestic that they can't be persuaded to leave the houseboat. Nelly told me she positively loved to polish kettles and things," Phil replied.

Lillian, Phyllis and Madge were in their own rowboat, the "Water Witch," which had been expressed to them from Harborpoint. They were no longer in the quiet inlet of the bay, where their houseboat was anchored, but rowing out toward the more open water. On one side of them they could see the beach in front of a large summer hotel. Across from it lay a small island, to which they were rowing.

"Miss Jones doesn't like to have us start off alone this way. She has grown dreadfully nervous about us since our experience in the cabin," remarked Lillian. "That is why she

didn't approve of Madge's plan this morning."

"I thought Madge was going to fly into little bits when Miss Jones suggested it was not safe for us to row about here in our own little 'Water Witch,'" teased Phil.

"Phil, please don't discuss my temper," answered Madge crossly. "If there is one thing I hate worse than another, it is to hear people talk about my faults. Of course, I know I have a perfectly detestable temper, but I hardly said a word to Miss Jenny Ann. Please tell me what fun we could have on our holiday if we never dared to go ten feet away from the houseboat?"

"None whatever," answered Lillian, "only you needn't be so cross with Phil and me. We were not discussing your faults. You are altogether too ready to become angry over a trifle." There was indignation and reproof in Lillian's tone.

Madge plied her oars in silence. She knew that she had behaved badly. "Isn't it exactly like me?" she thought to herself. "If I am sweet and agreeable one minute, and feel pleased with myself, I can surely count on doing something disagreeable the next. Now I have made Lillian and Phil cross with me and probably have hurt Miss Jenny Ann's feelings and spoiled this beautiful day for us all."

Eleanor's soft voice broke in upon her self-

arraignment. "Don't squabble, girls. The day is altogether too perfect. None of you are really cross. Now, are you?"

Three pairs of eyes met hers, then the little dispute ended in a general laugh.

Madge and Phil rowed faster than ever after this little falling out. They could see the shores of Fisherman's Island not far ahead, with several dories and small fishing craft anchored along the banks. They were heading toward an open beach, where there was no sign of life.

"Girls, look out!" warned Lillian. She was sitting in the bow of their skiff, and could see another rowboat moving toward them, the two pairs of oars rising and falling in perfect accord. The boat was so close to them that Lillian was afraid Phil and Madge might cross oars with it. But as the other boat glided smoothly up alongside of their skiff, the oars were drawn swiftly inboard, almost before the girls knew what had happened.

"I suppose you don't speak to people on the water whom you might be persuaded to notice on land," called Tom Curtis reproachfully.

"O Mr. Curtis! how do you do?" laughed Madge. "You see, we are not possessed with eyes in the backs of our heads, or we should have recognized you. Goodness gracious! If there isn't my cousin, Jack Bolling! I never

dreamed you knew him. Why didn't you tell me? Jack, where did you come from?"

Tom looked at Jack, and Jack looked at Tom. "Age before beauty, Mr. Curtis," bowed Jack. "You answer first."

"To tell you the solemn truth, I did not know your cousin until this morning," Tom explained. "But when I saw a not specially bad-looking fellow mooning about our hotel as though lost I went over and spoke to him. It wasn't long before I found out he knew you young ladies. I told him about meeting you in the woods the other day, and we shook hands on it. Now, Bolling, it is your turn. How did you happen to turn up in this particular place?"

Jack was apparently looking at Lillian and Madge, but he had really glanced first at Phyllis Alden, to see how she had borne the shock of his presence. Jack had guessed correctly that Phyllis did not like him. To tell the truth, she looked anything but pleased. She did not like boys. She could do most of the things they could, and they were, to her mind, a nuisance. They were always on hand, trying to help and to pretend that girls were weaker than they were in order to domineer over them. The worst of it was, Madge, Lillian and Eleanor might think the newcomers would add to the fun. So, though Phyllis did not mean to be rude either

to Tom or to Jack, she was far from enthusiastic, and could not help showing it.

"Of course, I had to come down to see what your houseboat looked like after I got your note telling me where you were," explained Jack. "I knew there was a hotel near here, so, as soon as school closed, I ran down for a few days to see how you were getting on. You see, I was really very much interested in the houseboat." Jack made this last remark directly to Phyllis. She merely glanced carelessly away in the opposite direction.

"We rowed up from the hotel to the houseboat, but we couldn't see a soul aboard. 'The ship was still as still could be,' " declared Tom. "Then we started for a row and found you." There was no doubt that Tom was looking straight at Madge.

"We are rowing over to the island," remarked Lillian graciously.

"How strange! We were going over there, too, weren't we, Mr. Bolling?" quizzed Tom.

"Then catch us if you can!" challenged Phyllis. With a sign to Madge the two girls began rowing their boat through the water with the speed of an arrow. The first spurt told, for the island was not far away, and the girls' boat grated on the beach before the boys had time to land. But Tom and Jack did jump out and run

through the water to pull the "Water Witch" ashore, much to Phil's disgust.

"I really have an errand to do on this island, Miss Morton," continued Tom, as the party started up the beach. "I wanted first to ask you if I could bring my mother to call on you and your chaperon this afternoon? I am awfully anxious to have an all-day sailing party to-morrow. And I thought perhaps you and your friends and chaperon would go with us? There is an old fellow over here who takes people out sailing, and I am anxious to have a talk with him. Don't think I am such a duffer that I can't sail a boat myself, but my mother is so nervous about the water that I take a professional sailor along to keep her from worrying. She has had a great deal to make her nervous," Tom ended. "I wonder if you and your friends would mind walking over to the other side of the island with me to see this man? It is not a long walk."

The party started off, Phyllis keeping strictly in the background. Madge walked with Tom and Lillian with Jack, so she felt a little out of it.

"If you don't mind," she proposed, after the party had walked a few yards, "I will sit down here on the beach and wait until you come back from your talk with the sailor man. I will stay

right here, so you can find me when you return."

Phil found herself a comfortable, flat rock, and sat looking idly out over the bay. Gradually she fell into a little reverie.

A sudden cry of pain roused Phil from her daydream. Springing to her feet, she rushed down the beach, seeing nothing, but following the direction of the cry. Rounding a curve of the beach she came upon a dirty, half-tumbled down tent. In front of it stood a burly man with both hands on the shoulders of a young girl, whom he was shaking violently. So intent was he upon what he was doing, he did not notice Phil approaching. She saw him shove the girl inside the tent and close the outside flap. "Now, stay in there till you git tired of it," he growled as he turned and walked away.

A sound of low sobbing greeted Phil's ears as she came up in front of the tent and stood waiting, hardly knowing what to do. The sobs continued, with a note of pain in them that went straight to Phil's tender heart. The sight or sound of physical suffering made a special appeal to her. It was Phyllis's secret ambition some day to study medicine, an ambition which she had confided to no one save Madge. Although the figure she had seen was almost that of a woman, the sobbing sounded like that of a

child. There was no other noise in the tent, so Phil knew the girl was alone.

"Won't you please come out?" she called softly, not knowing what else to do or say. "Tell me what is grieving you so. I am only a girl like yourself, and I would like to help you."

"I dare not come out," the other girl answered. "My father said I must stay in here."

Phil opened the flap of the old tent and walked inside. "What is the matter?" she inquired gently, bending over the figure lying on the ground and trying to lift her.

The girl sat up and pushed back her unkempt hair. She had a deep, glowing scar just over her temple. But her hair was a wonderful color, and only once before Phil remembered having seen eyes so deeply blue.

"Why," Phil exclaimed with a start of surprise, "I have seen you somewhere before. Don't you remember me?"

The girl shook her head. "I do not remember anything," she answered quietly.

"But I saw you on the canal boat. Your father was the man who helped us secure our houseboat. What are you doing here?"

"We have come here for many years, I think," the girl answered confusedly. "In the early spring my father catches shad along the bay. Then all summer he takes people out sail-

ing from the big place over there." She pointed across the water in the direction of the hotel. "Our boat is on the other side of the island." The girl clasped her head in her long, sunburned hands. "It is there that it hurts," she declared, touching the ugly, jagged scar.

Phil gave a little, sympathetic cry and put her hand on the girl's shoulder.

"When I work a long time in the sun my head hurts," the girl went on listlessly. "I have been washing all day on the beach. I came up here to hide, and my father found me. He was angry because I had stopped work."

"Did he strike you?" Phil cried in horror, gazing at the slender, delicate creature and thinking of the rough, coarse man.

"Not this time," the girl replied. "Sometimes they strike me and then I am afraid. Only there is one thing I shall never, never do, no matter how much they beat me. I can not remember everything, but I know that I will not do this one thing."

"What is it?" asked Phil. "Whom do you mean by 'they,' and what do 'they' wish you to do?"

The girl shook her head. "I can not tell you." She shuddered, and Phil felt she had no right to insist on knowing.

"I like to hide in this tent," the girl went on

sorrowfully. "I come here whenever I can get away from the others. I would like to stay here always. But, now he has found me, there is no place where I can rest."

"Have you a mother, or brothers and sisters?" Phil asked.

"There is the man's second wife, but she is not my mother. She has many little children. I think I must be very old. I seem to have lived such a long time."

"Can't you remember your own mother?" Phil inquired.

The girl shook her head mournfully. "I can remember nothing," she said again. "Don't go," she begged, as Phil rose to leave her. "I have never known a girl like you before."

"I must go," answered Phil regretfully. "My friends will be waiting for me up the beach, and they will not know where to find me. Won't you come to see me and my friends? We are spending our holiday on a houseboat not very far from here. We would love to have you come."

"I am not allowed to leave the island or to go among people," the girl replied. "My father says I have no sense. So, if I wander away, or talk to strangers, people will think that I am crazy and shut me up in some dreadful, dark place."

Tears of sympathy rose to Phyllis's eyes.

She wished Madge and the other girls were with her. It was too dreadful to think of this lovely creature frightened into submission by her cruel father. "We will come to see you, then," she said gently. "And I will bring you something to keep your head from aching. My father is a physician, and he will tell me what I must give you. I will bring my friends to the island with me. Whenever you can get away, come to this tent and we will try to find you. We shall have good times together, and some day we may be able to help you. You know how to write, don't you? Then, if you are ever in trouble or danger, leave a note under this old piece of carpet. Now good-bye."

The girl stood in the door of her tent to watch Phyllis on her way. She stared intently after her until her visitor turned the curve of the beach and was lost to view, then, leaning her head against the side of the tent, she burst forth into low, despairing sobs.

CHAPTER X

AN EXCITING RACE

ELEANOR and Miss "Jenny Ann," as the girls seemed inclined to call their chaperon, had not remained on the houseboat merely to polish the pots and pans. They had a special surprise and plan of their own on hand.

It was all very well for Phyllis to dream of a houseboat, with its decks lined with flowers, and for Madge to draw a beautiful plan of it on paper. Flowers do not grow except where they are planted.

So it was in order to turn gardeners that Eleanor and Miss Jones stayed at home. Flowers enough to encircle the deck of a houseboat would cost almost as much money as the four girls had in their treasury to keep them supplied with food and coal. But the gently sloping Maryland fields were abloom with daisies. A farmer's lad could be hired for a dollar to dig up the daisies and to bring a wagon load of dirt to the boat. The day before Eleanor had engaged the services of a carpenter to make four boxes, which exactly fitted the sides of the little upper deck of the houseboat above the cabin. An hour or so after the girls departed

on their rowing excursion the daisies were brought aboard, planted, and held up their heads bravely. They were such sturdy, hardy little flowers that they did not wither with homesickness at the change in their environment.

But still Eleanor was not entirely satisfied. In Phil's dream and Madge's picture of the boat vines had drooped gracefully over the sides of the deck, and Eleanor had no vines to plant. Eleanor had a natural gift for making things about her lovely and homelike. So she thought and thought. Wild honeysuckle vines were growing in the fields with the daisies. They were just the things to clamber over the white railing of the deck and to hang gracefully over the sides. Their perfume would fill the little floating dwelling with their fragrance.

By noon the transformation was complete. Eleanor persuaded Miss Jones to go for a walk while she got the luncheon. Madge, Phil and Lillian had solemnly promised to be at home by one o'clock. Another surprise was in store for them. In the bow of their boat Eleanor had hung up a flag. On a background of white broadcloth, stitched in bands of blue, was the legend "Merry Maid." This was Eleanor Butler's chosen name for the houseboat, and had been voted the best possible selection, while Madge had been unanimously voted captain of

their little ship. Eleanor had sent to the town for the flag, and even their chaperon was not to know of its arrival.

One would hardly have known Miss Jenny Ann Jones—a week in the fresh air had done her so much good. Then, too, Phil and Lillian had persuaded her to cease to wear her heavy, light hair in an English bun at the back of her neck. Lillian had plaited it in two great braids and had coiled it around her head like a dull golden coronet. She had a faint color in her cheeks, and, instead of looking cross and tired, she was as merry and almost as light-hearted as the girls. The lines of her head were really beautiful, and her sallow skin was fast becoming clear and healthy. For once in her life Miss Jones looked no older than her twenty-six years. Eleanor watched her as she started off on her walk dressed in white, carrying a red parasol, and decided that Miss Jones was really pretty. Since her advent among the girls she had begun to look at life from a different standpoint. She had almost ceased worrying and she meant to grow well and strong if she could. Since her mysterious visitor the first night she spent aboard the boat nothing had happened to disturb her. She walked slowly on, so occupied with her own thoughts she did not notice that she was in a lane between two fields enclosed

by fences. Some one called to her. She could not distinguish the voice. It called and called again. She thought it must be one of the girls who had come out in the field to meet her. As there was no one looking, Miss Jones managed to climb over the rail fence, and now she walked in the direction from which the sound of the voice came. After a time the voice ceased. It was a shorter stroll to the boat across this field, so the teacher went leisurely on. In a far corner of the meadow she saw an odd object unlike anything she had ever seen. It consisted of two sticks that looked like the legs of a scarecrow which had a square board fastened in front of them. From between the sticks were two other brown objects, long and thin, and behind it sat a young man busily engaged in transferring the peaceful scene to canvas.

Miss Jones was gazing curiously at this object, with her red parasol hung over her shoulder, so that it was impossible for her to see anything behind her. But she did hear an unusual noise—a snort, then a bellow—the sound was unmistakable. With a sense of sickening terror she gave one horrified glance behind her. She had been mysteriously lured into a field where a bull was loose. It never occurred to Miss Jones to throw away her red parasol. She ran on, waving it wildly over her shoulders,

maddening the enraged animal behind her. Miss Jones did not believe she could run fast. Usually her breath was short, and even a rapid walk fatigued her. Now she ran on and on. Once again she half heard a mocking voice cry after her, but she paid no attention to it. In her fright she was also oblivious to the fact that the strange object in the corner of the field fell to the ground with a bang, while a man sitting on a stool behind it rose to right his overturned canvas. "Drop it, drop it!" he shouted, running after Miss Jones and repeatedly urging her to throw away her bright red parasol.

Madge, Phil and Lillian had come back to the boat. After dancing in a circle around Eleanor to express the rapture they felt in the transformation she had wrought in their beloved houseboat, they stood together on the deck, looking for the return of their chaperon along the shore.

Miss Jones thought there was a gate at the end of the field in which she was running. She made for this gate, as she knew she would not have time to get over the fence before the animal would be upon her. In her terror she had but one idea, one hope, that was to reach the safety of the gang-plank and to climb aboard the houseboat.

While Miss Jones was running for her life the four chums were lingering about the deck

of the "Merry Maid" watching for her return. They decided to take a short walk with the idea of meeting her and, leaving their boat to take care of itself, strolled through the lane that led to the very field Miss Jones had entered. All at once Lillian called out in terror:

"O girls! look! It's Miss Jones, and a bull is chasing her!"

The four chums stood rooted to the spot. What could they do? They felt powerless to help, yet not one of the girls believed Miss Jones could save herself.

Madge was the first to act. In her hand was a large white and green striped umbrella. The girls had lately bought two of them to use out on deck as a protection from the sun, and Madge had caught up one of them as they started out. In the next instant she had climbed the fence that separated her from the field in which the teacher was running and was making for the frightened woman at the top of her speed.

But by this time Miss Jones was completely exhausted. Summoning all her will power, she staggered a few steps, then dropped to the ground, with the bull not more than four yards behind her.

On it came, its head lowered almost to the ground. Then a huge green and white monster loomed up before the animal, and with a snort

of mingled rage and horror the bull stopped short in its tracks. The strange green and white object now lunging at full tilt was far more terrible than the small, red, flame-like object that fled its approach. Rage conquering fear, the bull gave a dreadful roar and made a quick lunge at Madge. She sprang to one side but managed to thrust her umbrella full in the animal's face. With a rumble of defiance the bull dodged the umbrella and made another lunge at Madge. Its lowered horns never reached her. A rope swung skilfully forward caught the animal by the leg just in time. One swift pull and the bull went down. The owner of the animal had witnessed its charge upon Miss Jones and, rushing across the field, had roped it. The artist who had attracted Miss Jenny Ann's attention had also come to the rescue, but it was really Madge with her green and white umbrella who had saved their chaperon from the bull's horns.

Miss Jones, who had raised herself to a sitting position, stared wildly about her, still firmly clutching the red parasol.

The artist sprang to her side and raised her to her feet. "It was this that made the mischief," he said, touching her parasol. "I shouted to you to drop it."

"But I didn't hear you," defended the teacher faintly. Her two long braids of fair hair had

become unfastened and were now hanging down her back, giving her the appearance of a girl. "I heard some one calling to me, or I would never have entered that dreadful field." Miss Jones eyed the artist reproachfully. "Was it you who shouted my name?"

"Was it I?" repeated the young man in astonishment. "Certainly not. I do not know your name."

"My name is 'Jones,'" Miss Jenny Ann faltered weakly. She was still feeling dazed and weak.

"And my name is 'Brown,'" the artist answered, with an expression of solemn gravity. But the corners of his lips twitched in amusement.

There was a faint chuckle from Madge that went the round of the group and, despite the fact that the chaperon's narrow escape had been far from ludicrous, the whole party burst into laughter.

"I am sorry," apologized the artist. "Please forgive me for laughing."

The farmer had in the meantime led the bull away, and now Eleanor and Lillian came running toward the group to see if Miss Jenny Ann were truly hurt. When they saw the whole party shaking with laughter, the two girls exchanged curious glances. "Luncheon has been

waiting half an hour," Eleanor declared rather crossly. "Do come and eat it. We would not have come after you if we had known that you were having such a good time."

Madge glanced at their chaperon, then at the artist. He was evidently a gentleman, and she recognized that he was possessed of a keen sense of humor. It would seem rude and ungrateful to run away and leave him just as their luncheon was announced, when he had raced all the way across the meadow to assist in the rescue of their Miss Jenny Ann.

"Won't you come and eat luncheon with us?" asked Madge boldly, fearing their chaperon would be dreadfully shocked.

The artist shook his head. "I'd like to accept your invitation if Miss Jones will second it," he replied, looking at Miss Jenny Ann.

"You would be delighted to have Mr. Brown take luncheon with us, Miss Jenny Ann, wouldn't you?" Madge turned coaxing eyes upon their teacher.

"I should be very ungracious if I were not," laughed their chaperon, the color rising to her brown cheeks. "Mr. Brown will be a welcome guest."

And five minutes later Mr. Brown was triumphantly escorted aboard their beloved "Merry Maid."

CHAPTER XI

AT THE MERCY OF THE WAVES

"DON'T you think it would be perfectly lovely to have a mother as rich and beautiful as Mrs. Curtis?" asked Madge, as she tied a black velvet ribbon about her auburn curls and turned her head to see the effect. She and Phil were dressing for Tom Curtis's sailing party, to which he had invited them the day before and which was to start within the next hour.

"Almost any mother is pretty nice, even if she isn't rich or beautiful," answered Phil loyally. She was wearing a yachting suit of navy blue while Madge was dressed in white serge. Eleanor, Lillian and Miss Jones, clad in white linen gowns, were ready and waiting on the houseboat deck for the arrival of the sailing party. True to his word, Tom Curtis had brought his mother to call on the four girls the afternoon of the day before.

"I know," answered Madge slowly. "But sometimes, when I was a very little girl, I liked to think that perhaps I was a princess in disguise, and that Uncle and Aunt had never told me of it. I used to look out of the window and

wonder if some day a carriage would drive up to bear me away to my royal home. That doesn't sound very practical, does it? But, when one has no memory of father or mother, one can't help dreaming things. Don't you think Mrs. Curtis is simply beautiful?" Madge abruptly changed the subject. "Her hair is so soft and white, and she has such a young face, but she looks as though she were tired of everything. Persons who have that wonderful, world-weary look are so interesting," finished Madge, with a sigh. "I am afraid I shall never have that expression, because I never find time to get tired of things."

"Come on, Madge," laughed Phil. "You can mourn some other day over not having an interesting expression."

"Girls," called Lillian, "the Curtis's boat is coming."

"In a minute," answered Madge, giving a final pat to her curls.

"Do hurry along, children. The sailboat is nearly here." This time it was Miss Jenny Ann's voice. "They signaled us several minutes ago. They have several other persons on board."

Mrs. Curtis and Tom signaled as they approached the "Merry Maid." Their guests were the artist, whom the girls had met the day be-

fore, Jack Bolling, and one or two strangers from the big summer hotel. Mike Muldoon, the owner of the boats, had another sailor on board to help him. Tom soon transferred the girls and their chaperon from their craft to his. The party intended to sail down the coast to a point of land known as Love Point and to eat their luncheon somewhere along the shore.

Mrs. Curtis sat across from Madge during their sailing trip, but every now and then she would look over to laugh at one of the young girl's amusing sallies. It was evident that the little captain of the "Merry Maid" had found favor in her eyes. Mrs. Curtis had planned a dainty luncheon, to which the steward at the hotel had given special attention, even to the sending of a man to serve it. There were delicious sandwiches of various kinds, chicken and Waldorf salads, olives, salted nuts, individual ices sent down from Baltimore and bonbons. It was quite the most elaborate luncheon the girls had ever eaten and they were rather impressed with both it and the service.

After luncheon the party sat for a long time on the clean, white sand, laughing and talking gayly. It was a perfect day and everyone was in the best possible spirits. Later on they divided into little groups. Lillian and Phil wandered off with Jack Bolling. Eleanor found a

congenial companion in one of the young women guests from the hotel, while Tom, Miss Jones and Mrs. Curtis sat under a tree with the artist, watching him sketch. Madge, alone, flitted from one group to another, a little, restless spirit.

"Why don't you take Miss Morton for a sail, Tom?" suggested his mother. "You will have time to go a short distance out. We shall not start for the hotel until four o'clock."

"A good suggestion. Thank you, Mother," cried Tom. "Come on, Miss Morton."

Madge and Tom went gayly down to the boat. Tom's big setter dog, Brownie, dashed after them, pleading so hard to be taken aboard that Tom at last consented to have him, though he gravely assured the animal that three was a crowd, to which statement Brownie merely gave a joyful yelp and darted on board without further ceremony.

It was a glorious day with a stiff breeze blowing. The water was fairly choppy, but the boat sped along, occasionally dashing the spray into the two young faces. Madge wore a white cloth cap, with a visor, such as ship's officers wear, and looked as nautical as she felt. Both Tom and Madge were possessed with an unusual fondness for the water, and their common love of the sea was a strong bond between them.

Madge and Tom Went Gayly Down to the Boat.

"Have you ever heard of any one who could have locked you up in the old hut that night?" Tom asked as they sailed along.

Madge shook her head. "No; I have not the faintest idea. To tell you the honest truth, I had almost forgotten that unpleasant experience. We have been having such a beautiful time since that we haven't had time to think of disagreeable things."

"Do you think it is safe for five women to be aboard that houseboat by themselves?" asked Tom anxiously. "If your boat were farther out on the water you would be safer."

Madge laughed merrily. "Look here, Mr. Curtis, I don't think it is fair for you to question our safety when there are five of us. Wouldn't Phil be angry if she heard you say that! It makes her furious to hear a man or boy even intimate that girls can't take care of themselves. Why, we can swim and run and jump, and we could put up a really brave fight if it were necessary. Besides, Nell and I know how to shoot. Uncle taught us when we were very little girls. I have been duck shooting with him along this very bay. Look at that rowboat back there. I have been watching it for some time. It has been trying to follow us."

Tom turned about. The boat was only a skiff, and, though it was nearly in their course, there

was no chance of its coming any closer, as their boat was sailing before the wind.

"I believe it is the same skiff I saw this morning," commented Tom. "I suppose it is some fellow who has been fishing out here. Just think of the fish in this wonderful bay—perch and pike and bass and a hundred other kinds! You must help me catch some of them some day."

"All right, I will," promised Madge merrily.

As they went farther out into the bay they grew strangely silent. The spell of the sea was upon them and they were content to sail along, exchanging but little conversation. Chesapeake Bay was apparently in one of its most amiable moods and, lured on by its apparent good nature, Tom grew a trifle more reckless than was his wont and did not turn about to begin the homeward sail as soon as he had originally intended.

It was Madge who broke the spell. "I think we had better start back. Perhaps I merely imagine it, but it seems to me that the sun isn't shining as brightly as it shone a little while ago. I know the bay so well. It is so wonderful, but so treacherous. I was once out on it in a sailboat during a sudden squall and I am not likely to forget it." Madge gave a slight shudder at the recollection.

"All right," agreed Tom, "I'll turn about,

but there isn't the slightest danger of a squall to-day." He brought his little craft about and headed toward the beach.

In spite of his assurance that there would be no squall, a black, threatening cloud had appeared in the sky, and now the wind shifted, blowing strongly toward land. Tom, who was nothing if not a sailor, managed the boat so skilfully that Madge's apprehensions were soon quieted and she gave herself up to the complete enjoyment of rushing along in the freshened breeze.

They were within a mile of their landing place when, off to their right and a little ahead of them, Madge spied the rowboat they had seen at the beginning of their sail.

The boat was now tossing idly on the waves, and its sole occupant, a young man, was trying vainly to guide it with a single oar.

"There is that boat again," called Madge to Tom, who was busy with his sails. "I believe the young man in it is in trouble and is signaling to us for help."

As Tom drew nearer to the rowboat the other man in it called out: "Say, can't you take me aboard? I've lost an oar, and it's a pretty tough job trying to get ashore with one oar in a sea like this."

Tom glanced quickly at Madge. He was quite

ready to help the young man, but wished to be sure that his young woman guest had no objection to the stranger coming aboard their boat.

It took five minutes to bring the sailboat close enough to pick up the man. Tom threw him a rope and the stranger climbed aboard, making fast his rowboat to the stern of the sailing vessel. He was a peculiar, wild-looking fellow, with dark, shifting eyes and thick, curly hair that partly covered his ears. As he stepped into the sailboat his lips parted in a smile that showed his teeth, which Madge noted were long, very white and pointed at the ends. He was deeply tanned, yet, in spite of his rough appearance, seemed to be a gentleman.

"You are very kind," he said in a low, purring voice which caused Madge to eye him sharply. "I would not have troubled you, but there is a heavy squall coming up. I shall be greatly obliged to you if you will put me ashore."

"All right," assented Tom. "We are in a hurry to get to shore ourselves, as my mother will be anxious if the storm catches us."

Madge had continued to gaze at the newcomer. "Where have I seen him before? He is like a wolf. His teeth look almost like fangs, and I don't like his strange, shifting eyes," she mentally criticised.

Aloud she said to Tom: "Miss Jenny Ann

will be worried. She has been very nervous about us since we were locked in that old cabin in the woods overnight."

The stranger regarded Madge quizzically. She could have sworn that a mocking light lay in his dark eyes. "Did you say you were locked in an old cabin in the woods overnight? How unfortunate."

"It will be more unfortunate for the fellow who locked the girls in, provided we find him," threatened Tom shortly. The stranger's suave tones aroused in him a peculiar feeling of antagonism.

The young man regarded Tom through half-shut eyes. "I must ask you to land me on the beach above here," he drawled.

"Sorry," answered Tom firmly. "I don't know any other pier along here except ours. I told you I was in a hurry to go ashore. I don't like to be disobliging, but you will have to go to our landing with us."

The black clouds were now chasing one another across the sky, and the wind made a curious whistling noise. Nevertheless the boat was sailing gloriously, and in spite of the oncoming squall Tom and Madge were enjoying themselves immensely, though neither of them was much pleased with their fellow traveler.

The stranger turned to Madge. "You must

tell your friend that he'll have to land me somewhere else than in that picnic party," he muttered hoarsely. "I tell you I have a reason. I do not want to meet any society folks."

"I am sorry," answered Madge distantly, her eyes growing stormy at the young man's peremptory tone. "Mr. Curtis explained to you why we are in a hurry to land. As long as he took you aboard our boat with us as a favor, you have no right to ask us to change our course."

The stranger clenched his fists and glanced angrily at Tom.

"Ain't you going to land me somewhere else first?" he demanded in a snarling voice.

Tom quietly shook his head. The sailboat was now only a little more than half a mile from the pier. The wind was fair, blowing them almost straight to the pier.

Tom Curtis was not looking. Suddenly the fellow sprang up and threw the tiller over. The boat jibed sharply. Madge cried out in quick alarm. Her cry saved Tom Curtis from being knocked overboard by the boom as it swung over to the other side of the boat.

"Keep away from this tiller," Tom called out angrily, seeing that their boat had now entirely changed its course. "I am sailing this boat."

"You are not sailing her, if you don't take

her in where I say," the intruder declared fiercely. His eyes were bloodshot and his teeth closed together with a snap. He stood by as if he were going to spring at Tom Curtis.

Madge's cheeks were burning. She was so angry that her throat felt dry and parched. "Don't pay any attention to him," she called indignantly. Tom Curtis hesitated.

"I don't fight when I have a woman guest on board the boat," he declared doggedly. "Once I run my boat in to the pier, you will answer for this."

"Never mind threatening me: I'm not afraid of you. You know you have got to land me where I say. What do you care about where you land? It is where *I* land that is important." Again the stranger made a rush for the tiller.

Tom sprang upon him. The two were evenly matched, and Madge held her breath as she watched them struggle. Brownie, Tom's setter dog, sprang for the stranger's leg, then retreated to one end of the boat howling with pain. The intruder had swung back his foot and dealt the dog a savage kick.

The rain had now begun to fall heavily, and the deck soon became slippery as glass. The two young men continued to struggle. Tom realized that he was endangering Madge's life, as well as his own, in this reckless battle on the

deck of a small boat. He thought he now had the advantage. If he could only settle his hateful passenger with one swift blow all would be well. With this thought in mind he tore himself from the grasp of his antagonist, but he had forgotten the slippery deck. His foot shot out from under him, and he went down in a heap, falling heavily on one shoulder. The stranger sprang upon him, and now it was the ungrateful passenger who had the advantage and was mercilessly pushing him with both arms toward the edge of the boat. Slowly Tom gave way, inch by inch. He was conscious of a racking pain in his shoulder. He tried to raise his right arm; then a feeling of faintness swept over him, he reeled, and, before Madge could move to his help, Tom Curtis fell backward into the water.

CHAPTER XII

A BRAVE FIGHT

"BRING her to!" cried Madge imperiously, starting toward the stranger, who now stood by the tiller.

"I can't bring her to, I'm no sailor," answered the young ruffian coolly. "I didn't push your friend overboard; he fell. You had better sail the boat yourself instead of standing there giving me orders."

Madge regarded the stranger with horrified eyes. "You did push him overboard," she accused. "I saw you do it. If he drowns, you will be held responsible."

"I didn't, I tell you. Better be careful what you say. It wouldn't take much to send you after him," was the stranger's menacing retort.

With a look of withering scorn Madge coolly turned her back on the intruder. She would not take the trouble to bandy words with him. She was too angry to experience the slightest fear of this scowling, ill-favored youth. Her superb indifference to his threat made a visible impression upon him. With a muttered word he slouched to the bow of the boat, where he

crouched, glaring at her with the eyes of an angry animal brought to bay.

Although not more than a minute had passed since Tom disappeared over the side of the boat it seemed hours to the frightened girl. She must act quickly or Tom would be lost.

During their sail she had watched Tom Curtis manoeuvre the boat and had paid particular attention to his manner of "bringing it to." It had appeared to be a comparatively simple process and she laughingly remarked that she believed she could do it herself. Now the opportunity had come to prove her words. Grasping the tiller, she brought the boat directly into the eye of the wind. A moment later the sails flapped in the breeze, and the boat floated idly in the heavy rolling sea.

The stranger had not in reality given Tom the final shove that sent him overboard. At the edge of the boat he had suddenly relaxed his hold, and Tom, faint from the pain of his injured shoulder had toppled backward. The shock of striking the water revived him somewhat, and as he felt himself slipping down he made a brave effort to swim, then, finding it useless, managed to turn on his back and float.

Still keeping her hand on the tiller, Madge strained her eyes to watch his every movement. "Try to make it, Tom," she shouted encourag-

ingly. "You've only a little farther to swim. Come on; I'll help you into the boat."

"I'm afraid I can't, Madge," he called faintly. "I've hurt my shoulder. I can't swim."

The girl at the tiller bent forward to catch the sound of her friend's voice. Then she answered with the bravery of despair: "You must keep on floating. You are not going to drown. I am coming after you."

At the same instant Madge divested herself of her coat, shoes and the skirt of her suit and poised herself for a dive into the angry water. "Keep the head of the boat to the wind," was her curt command to the stranger, "I am going after Mr. Curtis."

"You're crazy!" shouted the stranger, leaping to his feet. "You can never save the man in such a sea as this. You'll both be drowned!"

His tardy expostulation fell upon unheeding ears. Madge was in the water and swimming toward Tom. Expert swimmer that she was, she knew that she was risking her own life. The tide was against her, and even though she did reach Tom before he sank again, it would be hard work to support him and swim back to the boat in such a heavy sea.

The sky was now dark, the waves had grown larger, and a pelting rain had begun to beat down in Madge's face. Tom had risen to the

surface of the water again, and was feebly trying to swim toward her. He had shuddered with despair when he first caught sight of her in the water. But his faint, "Go back! Go back!" had not reached her ears. Nor would she have heeded him had she heard.

His intrepid little rescuer was swimming easily along, with firm, even strokes. Little water-sprite that she was, she would have enjoyed the breakers dashing over her head and the tingle of the fine salt spray in her face if she had not realized the danger that lay ahead.

"Keep floating until I can get to you!" she called out to Tom. She did not speak again, for she did not mean to waste her breath.

Tom was making an heroic effort to keep himself afloat. But he was growing weaker and weaker, and the last vestige of his strength was giving way. As Madge reached him, he managed to reach out and clutch her arm, hanging to it with a force that threatened to pull them both under. He was making that instinctive struggle for life usually put forth by the drowning. Madge experienced a brief flash of terror. "Don't struggle, Tom," she implored.

Even in his semi-conscious state Tom must have heard his companion's words. He ceased to fight, his body grew limp, and, clasping one of his hands in her own strong, brown fingers,

Madge swam toward the spot where she had left the sailboat. Never once did she relax her hold on the burden at her side. Now and then she glanced up at their boat. Each time she caught a glimpse of it it seemed to be farther away. Could it be possible that the wind and the tide were carrying the sailboat ashore faster than she could swim? Surely the youth on board would come forward to help them. Now the waves that dashed over Madge's head and lashed across her face sent echoing waves of despair over her plucky soul. Tom was too far gone to know or to care what was happening. The responsibility, the fight, was hers.

"I must save him," she thought over and over again. "It does not so much matter about me; I haven't any mother. But Tom——"

Her bodily strength was fast giving out, but her spirit remained indomitable. It was that spirit that was keeping them afloat in the midst of an angry sea.

But as for gaining on the sailboat, she was right. No matter how great her effort, she was not coming any nearer to it. The last time she looked up from the waves she could catch only a glimpse of the boat far ahead.

It seemed incredible. It was too awful to believe. The stranger she had left on board the sailboat was not coming to their aid. He was

deliberately taking their boat to shore, leaving them to the mercy of the sea.

Even with this realization Madge did not give up the battle. The arm that held Tom Curtis felt like a log, it was so stiff and cold. She could swim no longer, but she could still float. There were other craft that were putting in toward the shore. If she could only keep up for a few moments, surely some one would save them!

But at last her splendid courage waned. She was sinking. The rescuer would come too late! She thought of the circle of cheerful faces she had left two hours before. Then—a cold, wet muzzle touched her face, a pair of strong teeth seized hold of her blouse. Tom's setter dog, Brownie, had managed to swim to his master. The animal's gallant effort to save Tom inspired Madge to fresh effort, and once more she took up the battle for her life and that of her friend.

CHAPTER XIII

LIFE OR DEATH?

"IS there no hope?" a voice asked despairingly.

"There is hope for a long time," answered Phyllis Alden quietly. "I have heard my father say that people may sometimes be revived after being in the water for many hours."

"She must live, or I can not bear it," declared Tom Curtis brokenly. "Oh, won't some one go for a doctor? Can't you do something else for her?"

"The man has gone for a doctor, Tom," soothed Mrs. Curtis. "Does your arm pain you much?"

"Never mind my arm," groaned Tom. "She saved my life, mother, and now she's dead." His voice broke.

"You mustn't say that," cried Phyllis sharply. "She *can't* be dead."

"Phil," entreated Miss Jones, "let me take your place. I am sure I can do what you are doing."

Phyllis shook her head. "I can't leave her."

Phyllis Alden knelt on the ground on one side of the unconscious girl. Jack Bolling and an

old fisherman knelt opposite her. The artist, Mr. Brown, was trying to assist in restoring Madge to consciousness. Phyllis Alden had been drilled in "first aid to the drowning" by her father. Long experience with the sea had taught the sailor what to do. But Madge had resisted all their efforts to bring her to consciousness. She had battled too long with the merciless waves and her strength was gone before the fisherman, coming home in his rowboat, had spied the three figures at the moment when Madge was about to give up the fight. He had hauled her and Tom inside his boat, and poor Brownie had somehow managed to swim ashore.

On the beach the fisherman found an anxious group of picnickers watching the storm with fearful eyes. Their fear was changed to horror, however, when the fisherman deposited his ghastly freight on the beach.

Fifteen minutes after being brought to shore Tom Curtis had returned to consciousness. His first words were for Madge. Although Tom had been a longer time in the water than his rescuer, his injured arm, which was sprained, but not broken, had prevented him from making so fierce a struggle; therefore he was far less exhausted than was his companion. To those who watched anxiously for the first faint sign of returning life it seemed hours since the fisherman

had laid that still form on the sand. It was none other than the old fisherman who discovered the faint spot of color which appeared in Madge's cheeks, then disappeared. After that the work of resuscitation went on more steadily than ever, and slowly and painfully Madge came back to life. Strange noises sounded in her ears. A gigantic weight was pressing upon her chest. She tried to speak, but it was choking her, crushing her. She made an heroic effort to throw it off, and then her eyes opened and dimly she beheld her friends.

"She has come back to us." Phil's voice was ineffably tender. She glanced up and her eyes met those of Jack Bolling. Forgetting her dislike for him, she smiled. She remembered only that he was Madge's cousin. Jack had always thought Phil ugly, but as he gazed into her big, black eyes and white, serious face, he decided that she had more character than any other girl he had ever met, and he would never forget the splendid effort she had made to save his cousin.

As soon as the work of resuscitation was completed and Madge declared out of danger, Mrs. Curtis insisted that on their return to the mainland her son's brave little rescuer should be taken to the Belleview Hotel, where she would be able to rest far more comfortably than if carried on board the houseboat.

A yacht was chartered to take the picnic party home. The sailboat had completely disappeared, and Tom was able to tell only a part of their strange adventure. From whence the youth whom they had taken on board their boat had come and why he had made off with their boat and left them to drown were questions which no one seemed able to answer.

It was not until two days later that the fisherman, searching along the very shore from which they had started, found the sailboat resting quietly at anchor about two miles from the pier where the picnic party had landed. The boat was uninjured, and Madge's hat, coat and skirt lay on the deck, where she had thrown them when she dived into the bay. But the wild lad who had caused the mischief had vanished completely. No one near had seen or heard of him. His identity was a mystery. If any one of the fisher folk knew his name, or where he had gone, they did not betray that knowledge. Mrs. Curtis wished to offer a reward for the fellow's capture. Tom would not consent. He intended to find his enemy himself, and to settle his own score. At night Tom used to lie awake for hours to plan how he would track the stranger and at last run him down. But in the day time he was much too fully occupied with entertaining his mother's young guest to plan revenge.

Madge had been the guest of Mrs. Curtis at the Belleview Hotel for five days. It had taken but a day for her to recover from the effect of her narrow escape from drowning. She possessed far too happy a disposition to dwell long on an uncomfortable memory, and her recent mishap soon became like a dream to her. But her feeling of affection for Mrs. Curtis was not in the least like a dream, and grew stronger with every hour she spent in her new friend's company. It was a red letter time for Madge.

Mrs. Curtis tried in every possible way to manifest her gratitude. Had not Madge saved her son's life? She felt that she could make no adequate return for the heroic service the young girl had rendered her.

She insisted that the most attractive apartment in the hotel should be Madge's and surrounded her with all sorts of luxuries. The young girl's suite consisted of a cosy little sitting room and a wonderful bedroom with white, rose-bordered walls and Circassian walnut furnishings. There was a little, white bath leading out from the bedroom and Madge reveled in her new-found treasures.

All day long her apartment was lovely with flowers. Tom Curtis ordered a box of roses to be delivered to her each day from Baltimore. The roses were presented to Madge every morn-

ing when the maid brought up her breakfast-tray, and for the first time in her life Miss Madge enjoyed the luxury of eating her breakfast in bed. Boxes of candy became so ordinary that she fairly pleaded with her friends when they came to visit her to take them back to the houseboat.

"Madge will never be happy again on the 'Merry Maid,' will she, girls?" The four girls were rowing back to their floating home after a visit to their friend.

"Yes, she will," returned Phil stoutly, though she felt a slight pang when she remembered how cheerfully Madge had kissed them good-bye.

"I am sure she is well enough to come home now," burst forth Lillian, "only Mrs. Curtis and Tom won't hear of it. Dear me! I suppose our little captain is happy at last. She has always dreamed of what it would feel like to be rich and a heroine, and now she is both. But nothing seems quite the same on the boat," she added wistfully. "I think we are all homesick for her."

Miss Jennie Ann laughed at their doleful faces. "She will soon be with us again," she declared. "I'll tell you a secret. She is coming home to the houseboat day after to-morrow. She whispered to me to-day that there was

really no reason why she should stay any longer with Mrs. Curtis, and that she did not wish to presume on her hospitality. Mrs. Curtis is very fond of her. She does not wish Madge to leave her." Miss Jones looked so mysterious that the girls regarded her curiously. "I think it is a good thing for Madge and for Mrs. Curtis to spend a few days together. Mrs. Curtis is lonely and needs good company," added Miss Jones.

"So do we," murmured Phil, with a rueful laugh. "We need Madge as much as Mrs. Curtis does."

After the girls had left her, Madge lay back luxuriously among her linen pillows. She was looking very lovely in a pale pink silk tea gown Mrs. Curtis had insisted on her wearing, for Madge had arrived at the hotel with no clothes other than the wet garments she had on when rescued from the waves. Her fine clothes occupied very little of her thoughts, however. She had something of far greater import on her mind.

The time had come to tell Mrs. Curtis that she must go back to the houseboat. She was not sorry to go; she was only sorry to leave her new friends. During her stay at the hotel Mrs. Curtis had treated Madge as though she were her own daughter. The imaginative young girl was

completely fascinated with the beautiful, white-haired woman, whose sad face seemed to indicate that she had suffered some tragedy in her life. While Madge lay thinking of the most courteous way in which to announce that she must return to the "Merry Maid" a light knock sounded on her door. Tom's mother came softly into the room, gowned in an exquisite afternoon costume of violet organdie and fine lace, which was very becoming to her white hair and youthful face.

"Are you awake, Madge?" were her first words. "How do you feel?"

Her guest smilingly raised herself from her pillows. "I am awake as can be, and as well as can be! To tell you the truth, Mrs. Curtis, I have never been in the least ill from my adventure. I was tired the day after it happened, but since that time I am afraid I have allowed you and Tom to believe that I was sick because I liked to be petted and made much of." Madge laughed frankly at her own confession. "You have been so good to me, and I do appreciate it, but now I must go home to my comrades. Eleanor was awfully disappointed to-day when I told her I was not going back with them this afternoon."

"I wish you would stay with me longer," pleaded Mrs. Curtis, taking the girl's firm brown

hand in hers and looking down at it gravely, as it lay in her soft white one. She gazed earnestly at Madge's clear-cut, expressive face. "Tom and I will be lonely without you," she said. "I want a daughter dreadfully, and Tom needs a sister. If only you were my own daughter."

Madge sighed happily. "It has been beautiful to pretend that I was your real daughter. It has been like the games I used to play when I was a little girl. I have been lying here in the afternoons, when you thought I was asleep, making up the nicest 'supposes.' I supposed that I was your real daughter, that I had been lost and you had found me after many years. Just at first you did not know me, because time had made such a change in me. But—— Why, Mrs. Curtis, what is the matter?" There was wonder and concern in Madge's question. "You don't mind what I have said, do you? I have been making up things to amuse myself ever since I was a little girl." She looked anxiously into the face of the older woman. It was very white, and seemed suddenly to have become drawn and old.

"My dear child, I love to have you tell me of your little dreams and fancies," said Mrs. Curtis affectionately, laying her hand on Madge's head. "What made you think I didn't?"

"You looked as though what I said hurt your feelings," returned Madge, coloring at her own frankness.

"It was only that something you said brought back a painful memory," explained the older woman. "I would prefer not to talk of it. Tell me, is there nothing I can do to induce you to remain with me a little longer?"

Her guest shook her head. "Thank you," she replied gratefully, "but I must go back to my chums. It won't be going away, really, for I will come to see you as often as you like, and you and Tom and Jack must visit us on the houseboat. I want you to like the other girls *almost* as well as you do me," smiled Madge. "Please don't like them quite as well, though. That doesn't sound very generous, but I should like to feel that I was first in your heart."

"You shall be, my dear." Mrs. Curtis bent and kissed the young girl's soft cheek. "And to prove just how much I do care for you I wish to give you something which I hope you will like and keep as a remembrance of me. I know your uncle and aunt will be willing to let you have this little gift when they learn of the spirit which prompted the giving of it." Mrs. Curtis drew from a little lavender and gold bag which she carried a square, white silk box and laid it in the astonished little captain's hand.

"What—why—is it for me?" stammered Madge, sitting up suddenly, her eyes fastened on the box.

"It is for no one else," was the smiling answer. "Shall I open it for you?"

Mrs. Curtis touched a tiny spring in the white box. It flew open!

There before Madge's wondering gaze, coiled on its dainty silk bed, lay a string of creamy pearls. They were not large, but each pearl was perfect, an exquisite bit of jewelry. Mrs. Curtis took the necklace from its case. She leaned over and clasped it about Madge's slender throat, saying: "Tom and I talked a long time about what we wished to give you as a slight remembrance of our appreciation of what you did for us. At last we decided upon this as being particularly suitable to you. Then, too, we wished to give you something that came up out of the sea."

"It is the loveliest necklace in the world," declared Madge happily, touching the pearls. "It is far too beautiful for me. I shall love it all my life and never, never part with it. You have been too good to me, Mrs. Curtis," she added earnestly.

"But think what you did for me," reminded the stately, white-haired woman.

"That isn't worth remembering. I did only

what any one else would have done if placed in the same circumstances."

"But you saved my son's life, and that is the greatest service you could possibly render me."

Yet before her vacation was over Madge Morton was to perform for her friend a further service equally great.

CHAPTER XIV

MADGE COMES INTO HER OWN AGAIN

LILLIAN and Eleanor were in the houseboat kitchen, making chocolate fudge and a caramel cake.

"I think it will be too funny for anything," laughed Eleanor. "Let's keep your surprise a secret from the others. It will be a delightful way to celebrate Madge's return. Do you know that we have a hundred and one things to do today?" she added, stirring her cake batter as fast as she could. "This boat must be cleaned from stem to stern. I told the boy from the farm to be here at nine o'clock this morning to scrub the deck. He hasn't put in his appearance yet. I wonder which one of us can be spared to go and hurry him along?"

"Let's ask Miss Jenny Ann," suggested Lillian slyly. "She has done her share of the work already, and Mr. Brown is sketching the old garden near the farmhouse. Haven't you noticed that our chaperon has been very much interested in art lately? Mr. Brown wishes to paint a picture of our houseboat. He has a fancy for this neighborhood. He thinks it is so picturesque. 'Straws show which way the wind blows,' you

know. Watch the candy for me. I'll go ask Miss Jenny Ann if she will go out and round up our faithless boy."

Miss Jones was quite willing to go, and started out, leaving the girls to their cleaning. Every now and then they were seized with a desire to work, which caused them to fall upon the houseboat and clean it from end to end. This morning the fever had been upon them from the time they had risen, and by the time Miss Jenny Ann started upon her errand it was in full swing.

Jack Bolling and Tom Curtis were to bring Madge home late in the afternoon, and, as a surprise for Madge, the boys had been invited to remain to tea. It was therefore quite necessary that their floating home should be well swept and garnished.

"Where's Phil?" asked Lillian, stepping from the kitchen out onto the deck, where Eleanor had gone after having seen her cake safely in the oven.

There came a series of raps on the cabin roof. Phil leaned over among the honeysuckle vines on the upper deck. "I am up here, maiden, digging in our window boxes. Want me for anything?"

"No," returned Eleanor, as she vanished inside the kitchen again. "But sing out if you see Miss Jenny Ann and the boy coming."

A little while later Phil saw the figure of a young man coming slowly down the path toward the houseboat. She thought, of course, that it was the boy from the farm. She did not turn around. She was too deeply engrossed in pulling up the weeds that had mysteriously appeared in their window boxes. When his footsteps sounded on the floor of the lower deck she called out carelessly, "Miss Seldon and Miss Butler are in the cabin waiting for you. Miss Jones is not here. I suppose she gave you the message."

The youth, who had been moving cautiously toward the houseboat, was not the boy for whom the girls were waiting. This one had black, curly hair and wild dark eyes. He looked up and down the shore. There was no one in sight.

Although there were several farmhouses beyond the embankment that sloped down to the inlet of the bay, there was no house within calling distance of the "Merry Maid." Their boat was anchored to the pier only a few yards from the shore, tied firmly to one of the upstanding posts. The youth grinned maliciously. He decided that he had met with an unexpected stroke of good luck. He was hungry and penniless. Nothing could be easier than to terrify the girls on board into submission, take what money and food they had, and be off with it before any one

appeared to help them. If it was a desperate venture, well, he must take a desperate chance. He could not wander around in the woods forever with no food or money.

Meanwhile Phil had not once glanced behind her. "You'd better begin scrubbing at once," she directed. "We have been waiting for you a long time. We wish to get our houseboat in order. We are going to give a party for our friends. Do hurry, there is such a lot to do."

The young man below was not troubling himself about the amount of work to be done; he had other matters to consider. This girl on top the cabin deck was evidently expecting some one. She would not come down her little ladder unless she heard a noise or disturbance from below. The next question was, how many girls were on board and where were they?

Eleanor and Lillian had finished the cake and the fudge. They had brought them into the living room and set them on the table to wait for the evening tea party. Eleanor was tired. She had thrown herself down on a lounge and her eyes were closed. Lillian, with her back to the door, stood talking to her friend. They did not hear the intruder's light footfalls.

Suddenly Lillian felt her two hands caught roughly behind her in such a powerful grasp that she staggered back. Eleanor sprang from

the couch, opening her eyes in amazement! She saw Lillian struggling with a man whose face wore the expression of a hungry animal.

"Don't scream," he ordered harshly. "Give me what food and money you have and I will let you go. If you scream, you will be sorry." He glared savagely at the two girls.

Lillian tried to wrench her hands from his grasp. They were pinioned so tightly behind her that she could not move. Eleanor slipped off her divan. She and Lillian had no weapons with which to defend themselves. Eleanor thought if she could get out of the room, while the man held Lillian, she could cry for help. Her first scream would bring Phyllis to their aid, and Phil would come to their assistance prepared to fight.

Eleanor looked so young and girlish that no one would have expected her to show resistance. She tried to look even more frightened than she really felt. "We haven't any money on board," she said quietly. "We don't keep our money here, but if you are hungry, we will give you something to eat without your being so fierce." Eleanor was edging slowly away from her couch.

"I don't want a slice of pie and your stale bread," the man replied angrily. "I want everything you have got, and I want it quick."

Now was Eleanor's chance. Lillian gave another frantic tug, attempting to free her hands. She had not cried out since the man seized her, but her face was contracted with pain. The robber was so fully occupied with holding her he was not looking at Eleanor, although his eyes slanted so curiously that he could apparently see on all sides of him.

Eleanor made a quick rush forward. With a thud she fell to the floor, and lay stunned by the force of her fall. The tramp, still holding Lillian by her wrists, had jerked her backward, thrown out his foot and tripped Eleanor. Now, before Lillian could scream, he whipped out a dirty handkerchief and tied it so tightly about her mouth that she could scarcely breathe. He next took a piece of twine and twisted it about Lillian's wrists, so that the cord cut into them.

While this scene of violence was being enacted Phil was perfectly happy and strangely unconscious of any trouble. She was still at work, sweeping the upper deck and clearing it of the trash she had made with her gardening. She was humming gayly to herself or she would have heard the sounds below more plainly. "There was a man in our town, and he was wondrous wise." She stopped short. She had heard a noise, as though something had fallen. But then, the girls were always dropping things

and stumbling over their few pieces of furniture. There was no further noise. Phil went on with her singing. But why did Lillian and Eleanor not start the farmer boy to scrubbing? It was getting late, and they wished to decorate the boat. Phil was too busy at her own task to go down to discover the reason.

The tramp gazed sarcastically at Lillian, whose eyes watched him defiantly, then at Eleanor, who was still lying on the floor. "Now, girls," he began with mock politeness, "I imagine you will be kind enough to be quiet for a time at least. So I think I will look around to see if there is anything here that I would like." He seized poor Lillian's plate of chocolate fudge and stuffed the candy into his pockets. Then he left the sitting room and crept into the bedroom which was used by Miss Jones and Eleanor. He found Eleanor's purse under her pillow and pocketed it. On the small dressing-table was Miss Jenny Ann's purse. He chuckled softly. This was the best of the sport.

Phil's humming upstairs stopped. Why did that lazy farmer boy not get to his work? And where were Lillian and Nellie? Phil listened. She thought she heard such an odd noise. It was as though some one were trying to talk while choking. She ran lightly down the outside cabin steps, her broom still in her hand.

She peered into the kitchen. It was empty. Phil did not go into the sitting room next. Some instinct must have guided her. Had she seen the plight poor Lillian and Eleanor were in, she must have screamed and betrayed herself. Instead she stepped into Miss Jones's bedroom.

The youth, with his back to the door, had ears like the creatures of the woods. Under other circumstances he would have heard Phyllis's approach. But something in the discovery of Miss Jenny Ann's poor little purse seemed to give him special joy. He was opening it and emptying it of its last penny.

Phil saw him from the open cabin door. She did not think—she acted. She saw, as she supposed, the farmer lad, intent on robbing them. Phil brought her broom down on the boy's head with a resounding whack.

The tramp started forward with a growl. For the moment he was nearly blinded from the pain of the blow.

Phil recognized that discretion was now the better part of valor. She dashed out of one door, then into another, the youth stumbling after her, raging with anger. She knew every turn and twist of the tiny cabin. Instead of running around the deck, where she would surely have been captured, she darted in and out of the cabin doors, those on the inside, swinging back-

ward and forward, sometimes closing a door in the face of her pursuer.

She was almost overcome with horror when she saw Lillian and Eleanor in the sitting-room. Lillian could not speak, but her eyes pleaded with Phil. Phyllis had no reason not to cry out. As she ran she screamed with all her might: "Help, help, help!" Some one would soon be passing along the shore who would come to their aid.

The thief did not like the noise Phyllis made. He also thought her cries would be heard on the shore. He had found what he wanted. He had no idea of being caught on the houseboat. But he had spied Eleanor's caramel cake on the table. He would take that and be off in a hurry.

As he grabbed Eleanor's cake, the product of her morning's work and the chief ornament of their tea party, Eleanor opened her eyes. The sight was more than she could bear. She gave a heart-rending scream. It added to the tramp's alarm. He made for the shore as fast as he could run.

Phil saw him start. She ran back of the kitchen and caught up something that lay coiled in a heap on the deck. As the thief ran down the gang plank and leaped on the land, it flew through the air with a hissing, swinging noise. The youth fell face downward, his arms close to

his sides, letting the beloved cake drop to the ground.

Not for nothing had Miss Phyllis Alden seen Miss Jenny Ann rescued from a wild bull by means of a lasso. Not for nothing had she spent hours of her time, and one of her few dollars, in acquiring the skill necessary to the swinging of a lariat. She now had her enemy held fast. At the same instant that Phil caught her prey, before he had time to jerk away, she knotted her rope about the cleat that held the anchor.

On the shore, the youth tugged and strained. He ran back into the water. It struck him that he might climb aboard the boat again. But his arms were caught down at his sides. It was impossible for him to get at a knife to cut the ropes. He could ease off the noose with his teeth, but it would be a slow process of escape.

As soon as Phil had her victim fast, she rushed back into the sitting room. She found Eleanor on her feet, engaged in untying the handkerchief from Lillian's face and cutting the twine that was bound about her swollen wrists.

"I've caught the enemy and he is ours," declared Phil cheerfully. "I have him tied to the side of the boat. I can't say how long it may take him to get away, and he may climb back on the boat and try to eat us up. But, at least, we can get ready for him."

The robber was doggedly working at the rope that bound him. "I am going to get back at you," he yelled savagely.

"Oh, why doesn't some one come?" cried Eleanor. "I am so afraid he'll get away."

There was a cheerful whistle at the top of the embankment. It turned to one of horrified amazement as the artist, Theodore Brown, took in the situation.

"What has happened?" he called out as he ran down the hill, swinging a small stick in his hand. "I heard your screams away over in the fields. What have you got there?"

Phil told the story. "What shall we do with our prisoner, Mr. Brown? We can't be bothered with him. We must get ready for our tea party," she concluded.

"I don't know what you wish to do with the young rascal," rejoined Mr. Brown, "but I know very well what I intend to do." The artist's face was set and stern. His eyes gleamed with righteous anger. Then he began calmly rolling up his sleeves. He went forward to the prisoner. "I am going to give you a taste of this," he declared, swinging his stick through the air. It hit Phil's captive with a swish, once, twice, three times. Mr. Brown was just warming up to his work.

"Leave me alone," the fellow howled.

"Aren't you a coward to hit me when I can't get at you!"

"You were not troubled about being a coward when you tried to terrorize three girls and got pretty badly left," Mr. Brown answered coolly, giving the youth another cut.

The bully groaned. The girls could not endure it. If the lad had taken his medicine like a man they might have borne the sight of his punishment. But there is nothing more sickening than the fear of a coward.

"Please stop now, Mr. Brown," entreated Lillian. "I am sure you have punished the boy enough. Make him give up the money he has stolen, but don't beat him any more."

"No, please, don't beat him any more," echoed Eleanor.

Phil could have endured to see the thrashing continue a little longer. But she did not wish to appear hard-hearted.

"Just as you like," answered Mr. Brown. "I am enjoying myself, but I will quit if you say so. Don't you think I had better turn him over to the police?"

"No," Phil protested. "He won't trouble us again, now he knows we can look after ourselves. Next time he wouldn't get off so easily."

The youth vowed never to come within the range of the houseboat if he were permitted to

go free this time. As he got out of sight he stopped to shake his fist at the distant houseboat. and he vowed to be revenged for the punishment he had received if it cost him his life.

The girls begged Mr. Brown to say nothing to their chaperon of their encounter. Miss Jenny Ann was already dreadfully nervous about them and, besides, it would spoil Madge's home coming.

By the middle of the afternoon Eleanor had made another caramel cake and Lillian another plate of fudge. The farmer boy had come down after luncheon, and had scrubbed the decks of the houseboat to the last degree of cleanliness. The girls had hung flags everywhere, and on the outside of the cabin, facing the water, Phyllis had hung a piece of white bunting with the word "Welcome" stamped on it in large letters. This was the first thing Madge would see as she came within sight of the houseboat.

Inside the cabin the table was set for tea. It held the best pickles, preserves, cold meats and jellies that the houseboat larder could furnish. Lillian had made a pitcher of lemonade and another of iced tea. Miss Jones had roasted potatoes, and her corn muffins were ready to slip into the oven as soon as she heard their friends approaching.

The three girls and their chaperon wore sim-

ple white frocks, with blue sashes knotted about their waists, for blue and white were the houseboat colors.

They were watching a golden sunset from the deck of their ship when, together, they espied a figure standing up in a small skiff that was moving in their direction. The boat was rowed by one man. The other man sat with his arm in a sling. The upright figure was waving a great bunch of flowers.

"Madge is coming!" cried Phil. The four women got out their handkerchiefs and shouted across the water.

As Madge climbed aboard the boat a strange, squeaky sound greeted her. First it played fast, then slow. It was undoubtedly music.

"My bonnie lies over the ocean,
My bonnie lies over the sea,
My bonnie lies over the ocean,
Oh, bring back my bonnie to me."

The tune was old as the hills.

"What on earth is that?" demanded Madge, as she kissed her chaperon and started around the semi-circle of her chums.

"It's Lillian's surprise!" Eleanor explained. "It's a hurdy-gurdy. We found it in the village. I know it is pretty old. But Lillian per-

suaded the man to bring it on board, as we thought it would be jolly to have a dance on the deck to-night in honor of Miss Madge Morton, captain of the 'Merry Maid.' "

CHAPTER XV

A CALL FOR HELP

"MADGE, you must go over to Fisherman's Island with me," urged Phil a few days later. "I feel dreadfully about Mollie. I promised the poor girl that we would come to see her soon. Now, a long time has passed; we have never been there. Eleanor and Lillian are anxious to go along with me. Mollie is perfectly lovely, and I am heartily sorry for her. Do come with us, there's a dear. Don't pretend you are tired, or make Miss Jones think you are sick. You are just as well now as any of the rest of us. If you don't come, it is just because you want to stay here to read that silly novel. Real people are much more interesting than stories."

Madge yawned and stretched herself lazily in the steamer chair. "Phil, it is awfully hot on the water. Couldn't we go to see your girl some other time? If she has waited this long, she may as well wait a little longer. You see, I promised Mrs. Curtis I wouldn't go out in the sun."

"Madge Morton, you are putting on airs. Going out in the sun, indeed!" Phil sniffed disdainfully. "When did the sun ever hurt you?

You just love to have people spoil you. You know there is nothing in the world the matter with you now. But please don't come, if you do not wish to. Nellie and Lillian and I are going now."

Phyllis walked quietly away, with her head in the air. Madge was really too provoking.

Madge closed her book with a bang and rushed after her friend. "Of course I wish to go with you, Phil. I am interested in your pretty girl. I had reached the most exciting part of my story when you asked me, and—— Now, you will hurt my feelings dreadfully if you don't let me go along with you! Just think, Phyllis Alden. You said I was spoiled, and that I liked to pretend I was sick, and I didn't get one bit angry. Don't you truly think my temper is improving?"

Phyllis laughed. "Oh, come on, if you like. Do you think Miss Jenny Ann would mind my taking the poor girl a basket of nice things? I mean things that any girl would like. My friend isn't in the least like a beggar."

"Of course, Miss Jones will let you do anything you like, Phil," replied Madge. "I am the only person she does not approve of." Madge felt angry because her chaperon had intimated that Madge was hurting Eleanor's feelings by talking so much of her Mrs. Curtis and the beautiful time she had spent with her. And

Madge, though she needed criticism even more than most other girls, was just as little pleased at receiving it.

The girls rowed over to the island in a short time. It was a lovely day, and not too warm on the water.

"I wonder, Phil, if there is a chance of our coming across the thief who attacked you on the houseboat? He may be in hiding on this island," said Madge as the four girls pulled their skiff up on the beach. "From your description I feel almost certain that he is the same boy who went off with our sailboat. I'd like to come across him again."

"Well, I wouldn't," declared Lillian. "I am not so bloodthirsty as you girls are."

The girls met no one along the beach, except a few children. Phil led them straight to the tent, where she had talked with the afflicted girl. "Of course, there isn't much of a chance that we shall find Mollie in the tent," explained Phil, "but I thought I would look here first."

"Do you know the girl's name, Phil?" queried Eleanor.

Phyllis shook her head. "Not her real name. I only call her Mollie because her dreadful old father called her 'Moll,' and 'Moll' is an ugly name."

The tent was more forlorn and dilapidated

than ever. It was empty. There was not a sign of life anywhere about, except for a few faded wild flowers cast carelessly in the corner of the tent.

Madge picked them up. "These flowers make me think of poor 'Ophelia' in the play of 'Hamlet.' Ophelia went mad, you know, and wandered about with wild flowers in her hair."

"Mollie isn't the least bit crazy, Madge. You will understand that as soon as you see her," protested Phil. "It is only that she is like a child, and does not remember things. Would you girls mind going around to the other side of the island? Mollie said their shanty boat was over there. I do so want to find her."

Lillian hesitated. "I don't think we ought to go among those rough fishermen again," she protested. "We are sure to see some rude sailors over there who might speak to us."

"Oh, don't worry, Lillian," reassured Madge. "I am sure no one would dare say anything to us."

Madge was now deeply interested in the discovery of Phil's friend and longing for any kind of adventure. She had fully made up her mind to see Mollie if it were possible.

It was more than a mile walk around the island. But the girls came, at last, to a spot where they again beheld a dirty canal boat

made fast to a tree on the sandy shore. A huge woman, with a coarse, dreadful face, sat out on deck holding a baby in her lap. Several small children played near her. But there was no sign of Mollie. Captain Mike was gone, and with him his sailboat.

Phil went as near the edge of the shore as she could. The woman gazed at the four chums with sullen curiosity. She presumed that they had come to ask her husband to take them out sailing. But Phil spoke up boldly: "May we see your daughter?" she inquired politely. "I met her the other day on the island and told her we would come to see her."

The woman's expression changed at once to an ugly scowl. Phil and Madge wondered why their request should make her so angry. What harm could come from their calling on the poor, half-crazed girl? Surely it was plain that they meant her no wrong.

"We want to be friends with your daughter," Madge declared haughtily; "we do not wish to injure her."

"Moll ain't here no more," the woman replied sulkily. "Her father has took her away. She ain't never coming back." The woman grinned as the four girls went away.

"O Madge!" Phil exclaimed, with her eyes full of tears, "I do feel so sorry. I am afraid

we have come too late. Poor Mollie will think I have broken my promise. What could have happened to her? Do you think her horrible old father has put her in an asylum? She told me that he often threatened her, unless she did whatever he said."

"Don't worry, Phil dear," Madge replied sympathetically. "Perhaps the woman was telling us a story and simply did not wish us to see her daughter. I will come to the island with you again. Maybe we can find her next time."

The girls hurried on until they were almost at the place where they had left their rowboat. Phil was unusually sorrowful and silent. She still carried her little basket with the gifts for her new friend. The memory of a pair of wonderful blue eyes haunted her. Mollie's face had looked so longingly into hers; it was filled with a wistful sorrow and was haunted by fear and loneliness. It was not that of one who is mad.

"Girls," spoke Phil quickly, "will you go on down to the boat and wait for me? I am going to run over to the tent and take another look in there. At any rate, I am going to leave this basket of food. I won't be gone but a minute."

Phyllis walked rapidly toward the tent. She half hoped she would find the vanished girl inside it. But the tent was still empty. Phil set down her basket. She was strangely disap-

pointed and grieved. She could do nothing more. There was nothing to do save go back to her friends. As she stepped toward the tent opening her foot caught in a piece of ragged carpet. Like a flash Phyllis remembered. Had she not told Mollie to slip a note under this carpet if she was ever in trouble or in danger and desired their help? Phil slid her hand under the rug and found a torn scrap of yellow wrapping paper. On it was penciled in the handwriting of a child:

"I am in much trouble. Please, please come to help me. You promised."

CHAPTER XVI

THE ATTEMPTED RESCUE

"I WILL go back to the shanty boat with you now, Phil," volunteered Madge when Phyllis returned to her chums, carrying the pathetic scrap of paper. "We have the food you brought in the basket, which we can eat for luncheon. Lillian and Nellie can row over to the houseboat to tell Miss Jenny Ann that we mean to spend the day here. Then, perhaps, they will row back for us this afternoon."

"I don't think we ought to leave you and Phil alone on this island," remonstrated Eleanor, "especially when you won't have a boat. If anything should happen, there would be no chance of your getting away."

"I'll tell you what to do, Nellie," suggested Phil. "Suppose you and Lillian go home and then send our boat over to us immediately. The farmer boy will bring it for us. He can tow it and then row back in his own skiff. Ask him to anchor our boat in this same place. Madge and I will come home as soon as we find out whether there is anything we can do for poor Mollie."

Lillian and Eleanor were reluctant to leave

their two friends. But there seemed nothing else to be done. The thought of their chaperon's anxiety at last persuaded them to go, and they departed after promising to send the boat over immediately they reached the "Merry Maid."

"What do you think we had better do, Phil?" asked Madge as the other two girls rowed out of sight.

Phil frowned and shook her head. "I haven't the faintest idea, Madge; I am afraid we are too late to do anything. That dreadful Mike has already taken his daughter away. I believe she wrote us several days ago, when she first heard what they meant to do with her. But I can't understand why her father wishes to put her in an asylum. She is much too useful to them. She does nearly all the washing and cooking on that miserable old shanty boat."

"I do wish we had some money," declared Madge thoughtfully. "I believe Mike would do anything for money. If we could only take care of Mollie, perhaps her father would let us have her. But you and I are as poor as church mice, Phil. Isn't it horrid?"

"I don't believe the man would give his daughter to us if we merely offered to take care of her. She is too useful to him. But he might let her come with us if we could pay him a great deal of money besides. At least, if we offered

him a bribe he might be influenced to tell us where poor Mollie is. However, there is no use in talking about money. We'll have to do the best we can without it," finished Phil.

The two friends were walking disconsolately along the shore of the island. Neither one of them was anxious to return to the shanty boat for another interview with the slatternly woman who presided over it.

"Phil," Madge's eyes brightened, "if we need any money to help this girl, I feel sure Mrs. Curtis will be glad to give it to us. She is rich and generous, and Tom says she dearly loves to do things for those who are in need. I should not mind in the least asking her help. She is very fond of young girls."

"She is very fond of you, at any rate," returned Phyllis, with a smothered sigh. "Sometimes I feel as though she wanted to take you away from us for keeps."

Madge laughed. "What nonsense, Phil. Why should she wish to take me away for 'keeps'?"

But Phyllis did not reply to the little captain's laughing question.

"Let's not go around to the shanty boat the way we did this morning. Let us go back the opposite way, and then we shall have encircled the whole island," planned Madge. "If Mollie is

hidden anywhere, we might happen to discover her."

The loneliness of their walk affected both Madge and Phyllis. There were no houses on the island. It was visited in the autumn for duck shooting, and in the summer was used as a camping ground for a few fisher folk. The girls passed only one man in their entire journey. He was lying under a tree, fast asleep. A hat covered his face. As the two friends hurried by they did not seek to discover who the man was. He was a rough-looking fellow, and they preferred not to awaken him.

This time the deck of the shanty boat was deserted. It was noon. The other members of the small shanty colony must have been out on the water, for there was no one in sight.

The girls stood staring irresolutely at the boat. "I suppose the woman is indoors fixing the luncheon. I can see the smoke coming through the smokestack," declared Phil. "Shall we call to her, or just march boldly aboard her old boat?"

"I don't know," hesitated Madge. "I don't believe we ought to mention Mollie's note. We might get the child into more trouble."

Phyllis shook her head. "Well, then, you decide upon something. You always plan things better than I do. I think we had better say that

we have come back to inquire of Captain Mike how long he expects Mollie to be away. Then we can insist on waiting until his sailboat returns."

The two girls strode bravely up the single, rickety board that served as the gangplank of the shanty boat. At their first step on the deck a yellow dog rushed to the door of the dirty kitchen and set up a furious barking. Behind him stood the menacing figure of the woman whom Madge and Phil had seen a short time before. About her torn skirts were clustered three or four stupid-looking, tow-headed children. It was impossible for Phil to conceive how beautiful Mollie could be a member of such a family. Yet the unfortunate girl had told Phyllis that she had known no other than the hard, joyless life she had always led.

It was Madge who opened the conversation this time. To her disappointment she received no different answer to her inquiries than had Phil. "Moll was gone." The woman did not know where she had gone and she didn't care. But she wasn't coming back. Further, Mollie's step-mother did not see what business Phil and Madge had in coming to ask about her.

"We are going to wait to talk to your husband," announced Phil with quiet decision.

"You git off my boat in a hurry," the woman snarled angrily. "You can stay on the island

all day if you like, but you can't hang around here. Mike won't be home before night, and he ain't goin' to tell you nothin' then. You'll find the beach pretty comfortable; it's so nice and shady." The woman grinned maliciously.

The two girls sat down on the stretch of hot sand near the water. They were doggedly determined to wait as long as possible for Mike Muldoon's return. Mollie's pathetic appeal had touched Madge as deeply as it had Phil, and they were both resolved to help the child if they could.

The hours dragged by on leaden wings. Madge's head ached violently. Phil was beginning to think longingly of the basket of food which she had left in the tent and wondering if it would do for her to go after it while Madge stayed on guard. As she sat deliberating as to what course of action would be the wisest, a sudden commotion arose among the children playing on the deck of the shanty boat. The dog began to bark furiously. "Mammy, here comes Pap," the oldest child cried.

The tired girls could see that a sailboat was being anchored near the shore. A few moments later Mike, who insisted on being called "Captain," got into a skiff and rowed toward the land.

Madge sprang to her feet and ran down to

The Girls Ran Down to the Water's Edge.

the edge of the water. She wished to attract Mike's attention before he went aboard his own shanty boat. To think with her was to act. She realized that she must speak to the man before his wife could tell him the nature of their errand. If Mike Muldoon learned their real design, he might shut himself inside his shanty and refuse to talk to them.

Mike rowed toward his callers, who were anxiously waiting for him. As his boat scraped the shore his wife shrieked at him, "Come here fust, Mike! Don't you be goin' talkin' to the likes of them before I tells you somethin'."

She was too late. Captain Mike had already turned to Madge. He supposed the girls had come to engage his sailboat.

Captain Madge decided to try diplomacy. She did not wish to make the sailor angry. She hoped she might persuade him to do what they wished.

"We have not come to rent your sailboat today, Captain Mike," she announced cheerfully, "we are coming for that another time. What we wish now is to ask you what has become of your pretty daughter? We have crossed all the way over to the island to make her a call. And now we can't find her. We wish to make friends with her, if you don't mind."

"Moll can't make friends with nobody," Mike

answered suspiciously, his skin turning a mottled red under its coat of tan. "I told you Moll was foolish."

"Yes, I know," answered Phil unwisely. "That is why we are so sorry for her."

Mike scowled darkly. "You ain't got no cause to be sorry for the gal. Who told you she was treated mean? Nobody don't hurt her. But you can't see her. She is sick."

"Why, your wife told us she had gone away!" exclaimed Phil impetuously.

She could have cried with regret the next moment, for she realized how foolish she had been.

"So she has gone away," Mike muttered, "and she is sick. I ain't no liar and my wife ain't neither."

"When will she come back, Captain Mike?" asked Madge in a friendly tone, hoping the title of "captain" would soften the surly sailor.

"She's not comin' back," the man replied impatiently. "I've got to go to my dinner, and I ain't goin' to answer no more questions. Don't you come foolin' around this way any more; my old woman don't like it. I warn you for your good."

Phil was tired of deceit. She knew Mike had not told them the truth. "Captain Mike," she demanded coolly, "have you put your daughter in an asylum? If you have, I think you have

been both inhuman and cruel. Mollie is not crazy. If you will tell us where she is we will look after her, and she need not bother you any more." She raised her dark eyes and gazed defiantly at the angry sailor, who shook his great red fist full in her face.

"You'll take a man's own daughter away from him, will you?" he raged. "What makes you so interested in my gal? And who told you Moll was shut up with a lot of crazies? My Moll is going to be married; she has gone away to git her weddin' clothes."

He laughed tantalizingly into the girls' faces as though well pleased with his own joke.

"Mollie married?" Phil exclaimed in horror. "Why, she——" Then Phil stopped herself and inquired, with an innocent expression of interest, "Whom did you say Mollie was going to marry?"

"She is going to marry Bill Barnes, a friend of mine," retorted the sailor sarcastically, his heavy shoulders shaking with savage amusement. "He ain't much to look at. It's kind of a case of Beauty and the Beast with him and my Moll. But she's powerful fond of him."

"Mike!" a shrill voice screamed from the shanty boat kitchen, "come along in here."

Mike glared at his questioners, his face set in savage lines. "Don't never come here agin,"

he growled. "If you do, I ain't sayin' what will happen to you." Turning abruptly he strode toward his boat, leaving the girls standing where he had first met them.

There was nothing for Madge and Phil to do but to return once more to their own boat. "O Madge! it is too dreadful!" exclaimed Phil in a husky voice. "I understand now what poor Mollie meant. She said there was one thing she would never do, no matter how cruel her father might be with her. Of course, she knew they were going to try to force her to marry some frightful looking fisherman. We simply must try to find her and save her. It is a wicked shame!"

"Don't be so wretched, Phil," comforted Madge, though she felt equally miserable. "You are right; we must find out how to save poor, pretty Mollie. I can't think what we ought to do, just this minute, but we must do our best. Now I think we shall have to go home and talk things over with Miss Jenny Ann and the girls. We will come back to-morrow, prepared to make a fight to save Mollie. Surely she can't be married by that time."

The two friends stopped by the tent for their basket of food and sat down just outside it under a tree to eat their luncheon. Neither of them noticed that they had seated themselves with

their backs to the water, and they were so interested in talking of Mollie that they gave no thought to the outgoing tide. By rising they could see their boat drawn up on the shore, where, as arranged with Lillian and Eleanor, it had been left by the farm boy. What they failed to notice, however, was the distance it lay from the water line, and they also had forgotten that it was time for the going out of the tide.

As they sat quietly eating their luncheon the sound of running feet was borne to their ears. Nearer and nearer they came. Then round the curve of the beach darted the object of their morning's search. With a wild cry she flung herself upon Phil. "You said you would help me," she moaned. "Oh, help me now." Little rivulets of water ran from her ragged clothing. The pupils of her dark blue eyes were distended with fear. Her dress was torn across her shoulder and an ugly bruise showed through it. There was a long, red welt on her cheek that looked as though it had been made with a whip, and another across one forearm.

Madge and Phyllis rushed toward the frightened girl. Phil put her arm protectingly about Mollie while Madge stood on guard. Resolution and defiance looked out from their young faces. They were not afraid of poor Mollie's captors. They would fight for her.

"How did you come to us? Where have you been?" questioned Phil.

Five minutes had passed and no one had appeared. "Sit down here, Mollie. We won't let any one hurt you."

"I was hidden in the shanty boat, locked in a dark closet," faltered Mollie, casting a terrified glance about her. "I heard you ask for me, but I could not come out. The woman is more cruel to me than the man. She would have killed me. But when my father came home he was so angry because you had been to see me that he beat me and said I must marry Bill to-morrow, before you could come back to help me. Oh, he is horrible! I won't marry him! I'll die first! I crawled through a porthole in the boat when I heard what they said. I dropped into the water and swam and swam until I could land on the beach out of sight of my father's boat. Then I ran until I found you. But they will try to find me. They may be looking for me now. Tell me, tell me what I must do?"

"Don't be frightened," soothed Madge. "They can't force you to marry Bill or any one else against your will. Phil and I will take care of you. Come with us. We are going over to our houseboat now. Your father need not know what has become of you. Hurry!" Madge was listening intently for sounds announcing the

coming of Mollie's pursuers. So far the girls were safe. A moment more and they would be in their rowboat.

Linking their arms within Mollie's her rescuers hurried her along. Straight to the water's edge they ran, then a cry of consternation went up from the two girls.

"O Madge! what shall we do? We forgot all about the tide," mourned Phil. "It has gone out, and now we'll have to drag our heavy boat half a mile through the sand to the water or else wait until the tide runs in again before we can get away from the island."

CHAPTER XVII

THE CAPTURE

MADGE hurried down to where their row-boat lay. She dragged the anchor out of the sand and pulled at the skiff with all her might. Phil also took hold and together the two girls worked like beavers, but without success. The boat was firmly wedged in the sand.

"Is there any place on the island where we can hide, Mollie?" questioned Phil as the two girls rested for a moment from their fruitless effort. "We can not leave here until the tide turns."

"I know a cave," said Mollie hesitatingly. "It is in the woods not very far from the beach. But I am afraid they will find us there."

"We had better go to it," urged Madge, wiping the perspiration from her tired face. "At least we can hide in the cave for a while, until we make up our minds what is best for us to do. We may not be discovered until the tide turns. Later on I shall slip down here again to see if things are safe, and then we can make a run for our boat. If we wait here along the shore, we shall not have the least chance of escaping. The

first person who comes to look for Mollie will surely see us. Come on. We have no time to lose."

This time Mollie led the way through a tangle of trees and underbrush to the center of the little island. Here they found the cave which was only an opening behind an immense old tree that had been uprooted by a storm. A flat rock protruded over the hollow, and the sand had gradually drifted away until the cavity was hardly large enough to hold the three girls. These were cramped quarters, and they were only partially protected from view by the immense roots of the fallen tree, but they knew of no other refuge and resolved to make the best of it.

The girls had barely crept into their hiding place when they heard a noise of some one tramping through the underbrush. A few moments later a man slouched along a narrow path between the trees. His hat was pulled down over his face, but Madge and Phil recognized him by his dress as the man they had seen asleep on the ground earlier in the day.

Mollie made no sound. She was hidden between the two friends, and never in her life before, so far as she could recall, had she been so protected by affection. But her increased trembling told her rescuers that she had recognized

the man who passed so near to them, and that she feared him.

"It's Bill," she faltered when the figure disappeared without having the slightest suspicion that he was being watched. "He is on his way to our boat. He will ask for me, and my father will be sure to find out that I have gone. Then they will come out here to hunt for me."

For a long time after Mollie's disquieting prediction none of the three prisoners spoke. They hardly dared to breathe. Their bodies ached from their cramped, uncomfortable positions; they were hungry, and, worse than anything else, Madge and Phyllis were tormented with thirst. Since leaving the houseboat early in the morning they had drunk no water. Phil was thinking remorsefully that all this trouble had come from her asking Madge to go with her to the island in search of Mollie.

Madge was wondering just what she would do and say if Mollie's father should find them, while Mollie's delicate face had lost its expression of apathy and now wore one of lively terror. Even the faint rustle of leaves as a passing breeze swept through the trees caused her to start. An hour passed and no one came to look for them. Either Mike had not learned of his daughter's escape, or else he had not taken

the trouble to come to search for her. He must have believed that she would return to the boat later on of her own accord, driven by hunger and loneliness.

It was now growing late in the afternoon. Neither Madge nor Phyllis wore a watch, so it was impossible to tell how much time they had spent in the cave. Miss Jenny Ann would wonder what had happened. Of course, Lillian and Eleanor would explain matters. Miss Jones might remember the tide and understand what was keeping them away. Yet there was a lively possibility that she might fail to take the tide into consideration.

At last Madge decided to end the suspense. She knew their skiff would float from the shore of Fisherman's Island several hours before full tide. They had tried to make their escape at the moment when the tide was almost at its lowest ebb. The tide had been high that morning. It was nearly two o'clock in the afternoon when they had attempted to leave the island. She now believed it to be almost five o'clock. At least, it was time to reconnoitre. She put her ear close to the ground. She could hear no sound of any one approaching.

"Phil," she whispered, "will you and Mollie please wait here for me. I am going down to the water to see if it is possible to get the boat

off. It must be very late. Remember, high tide is at eight o'clock to-night. We ought to be able to pull away from here between five and six o'clock. When I come back to tell you how things are we can make a run for it to the beach, and perhaps get a fair start before we are seen."

"Let me go with you," insisted Phil, as anxious as her chum to get out of their close quarters.

"I don't think we ought to leave Mollie alone," demurred Madge. "But, if you think best, you may go and I will stay here."

Mollie's terror at Phyllis's suggestion of deserting her was too much for tender-hearted Phil. "No, I won't leave you," she said gently, taking Mollie's hand in hers. "You had better run along, Madge. I'll stay here. But, for goodness' sake, do be careful. If anything happens to you, Mollie and I will starve in this cave like Babes in the Woods, if you don't come back to find us."

Madge crawled cautiously out of the hole. Her muscles were so stiff that she rose to her feet with difficulty. But she soon started off through the narrow path between the trees, making as little noise as she possibly could. Her way through the grove of trees covered the greater part of the distance to the shore. But there was still a stretch of open beach, where

she feared she would be discovered. When she came to the shelter of the last tree she stopped and peered cautiously up and down the line of the shore. As far as she could see the beach was empty. And, surely enough, the tide was coming in. Tiny waves touched the prow of the "Water Witch." It was true the water was not yet deep enough to float their boat, but in less than an hour they might be able to row away from danger with their new friend.

There was but one thing to do. She must return to Phyllis and Mollie, and they must make up their minds to remain in their hiding place for a little while longer. Madge hated to go back to the cave. She would have liked to linger in the woods, hiding behind the trees until they were able to leave the island. But she knew it would not be fair to Phyllis and Mollie to leave them any longer in suspense. They would think something had happened to her unless she returned to them at once. The knowledge that she had not been seen made her feel more cheerful. She was sure that she would yet outwit the brutal sailor, Mike Muldoon, and carry Mollie safe to the shelter of their houseboat, where Miss Jenny Ann, or perhaps Mrs. Curtis, would tell them how they could continue to take care of the poor girl.

Unfortunately, Madge's gown was of some

soft, white material and altogether too conspicuous. She could be easily seen for some distance as she ran along the shore, and in her anxiety to return to her friends as soon as possible she did not look about her as carefully as she should have done. Therefore she missed seeing the cruel face that stared malignantly forth from the opening in the tent where Phil had her first talk with Mollie. The man's whole body was carefully concealed, and as Madge flitted by the tent his head disappeared from sight.

The man in the tent had caught sight of Madge's white gown the moment she stepped forth from the shelter of the woods. He had at once understood the situation, but he did not stir until she started to return to the cave. He knew that Madge had come down to see if she could get the boat off the beach and into the water. It was evident that the other girls must be hidden somewhere in the forest. There was nothing to be gained by capturing Madge alone; he must wait until she went back to her friends, then he could find out where Mollie was concealed.

The boat on the shore and the disappearance of the two girls who had visited him that morning told the whole story. Why had the two young women concealed themselves unless they meant to guard the fugitive Mollie?

When Madge started back through the woods the man followed her at a safe distance. He did not wish her to know that he was following her, for fear she would lead him off the trail, but he kept near enough to know exactly where she was going.

She arrived, as she believed undiscovered, at their hiding place in the woods.

Phyllis and Mollie heard her light footfalls and gave a united sigh of relief. Their friend had escaped discovery. So far all was well!

Madge leaned over the opening of the cave to reassure her friends before she crawled into it again.

"It's all right!" she cried softly. "I saw no one, heard nothing. We can get away, without any trouble, in another hour."

She crouched down to slip into the place of concealment. At the same instant the three girls heard a noise. It was unmistakably the hurried tramp of heavy feet! Mike Muldoon burst through the thicket of trees, his face blazing with heat and anger.

CHAPTER XVIII

ON A STRANGE SHORE

MADGE had just time enough to leap to her feet. She would not allow their determined enemy to catch her while in the act of hiding.

"Keep still," she whispered quickly to Phyllis and Mollie. Then she turned, with flashing eyes, to the approaching figure of Captain Mike Muldoon.

"What do you want?" she demanded imperiously, stamping her foot. "Why have you followed me through the woods?"

For a moment the man was speechless. It had not dawned on him that Madge would turn upon him. He had expected her to burst into tears and exhibit signs of fear.

"I want my daughter, and I want her quick, young woman," he answered gruffly. "When I find her I will settle with you." He pushed past Madge and dragged the unfortunate Mollie from her place of shelter. Phil sprang out after her. Her black eyes were flashing with anger and disappointment. She fastened a firm grip on Mollie's arm. If Mike Muldoon jerked or shook his daughter, he would jerk and shake Phyllis Al-

den, too, for nothing would induce her to let go her hold on Mollie.

"Let me go," whispered Mollie gently, looking affectionately into the faces of her new friends. "I don't want you to be in trouble for my sake. I ran away. It was no fault of yours." Mollie appeared to be quite rational. She seemed to appreciate the girls' loyalty to her.

"Give up my daughter and get back to where you came from, and I will let you off this time," roared Mike savagely. He did not think it wise to deal roughly with the girls. Their friends would surely come to look for them and hold him responsible for their disappearance.

"We won't go a step unless you will let Mollie go with us," returned Phil wrathfully. "You shan't make her marry that horrible Bill. It is unlawful for you to force her to marry against her will."

Mike moved stolidly ahead, gripping his daughter and pulling her along with him. Phyllis, who was still clutching Mollie's arm, followed after, while Madge walked valiantly by Phil's side.

"Leave go!" Mike shouted, raising his fist threateningly at Phyllis. Mollie cried out at the thought of possible hurt to her friend, but Phyllis did not falter. She gazed up at the

burly sailor with a look of such intense scorn, mingled with defiance, that he dropped his hand to his side and said sneeringly: "Come back to my shanty boat, then. I will settle with you when we get there."

Tightening his hold on his daughter's arm he strode off toward the shanty boat, dragging poor Mollie along at a cruel rate of speed. Phil, still clasping Mollie's other arm, kept pace with her, while Madge marched a little to the rear with the air of a grenadier.

Mollie's beautiful white face was set in lines of despair, but her companions felt nothing save righteous indignation against the brutal man they were forced either to follow or else leave Mollie to her fate.

On the deck of the wretched shanty boat, this time, a man and a woman were waiting with burning impatience. The man was Bill and the woman was Mike Muldoon's wife. A group of fisher folk stood near, evidently anxious to know what was going to happen. It was late in the afternoon, and they had returned from the day's work on the water.

Madge broke away from her own party to run toward these men and women. There were about half a dozen in number. "Won't you help us?" she cried excitedly. "Captain Mike is trying to force his daughter to marry that

dreadful Bill. He has beaten her cruelly because she refuses to do it. My friend and I tried to get Mollie away from him, but he found us and forced her to come back here."

"Don't hurt the young ladies, Mike," remonstrated one of the fishermen, with a satirical grin in their direction, "it wouldn't be good business." Then he turned to Madge and said gruffly: "It ain't any of our lookout what Mike does with his daughter. She's foolish, anyhow. Can't see why Bill wants to marry her."

Muldoon had jerked Mollie from Phil's restraining grasp and flung her aboard the shanty boat. The woman pushed the girl inside the cabin and closed the door. Then she stood waiting to see what her husband intended to do with the two girls.

Captain Mike was puzzled. He stood frowning angrily at Mollie's defiant champions. They had refused to go back home. He had given them their opportunity. It was just as well they had not taken it, for suddenly the man was seized with an idea.

"Git into my rowboat," he ordered Phil and Madge. "I am going to put you aboard my sailboat and carry you home to your friends. You had better take my offer. You'll only get into worse trouble if you stay around here. How do you think you are going to take care of Moll—

knock me and Bill and my old woman down and run off with Moll?"

"Won't any one here help us?" asked Phil, turning to the grinning crowd.

"You had better go home with Mike. It's the only thing for you to do," advised a grizzled old fisherman. "Your hanging around here ain't going to help Moll."

Madge and Phil exchanged inquiring glances. For the time being they were beaten. It was better to go home. Later on they would see what could be done for their friend.

"We would rather go back in our own boat," Phil announced, making a last resistance. Madge, who was already in Mike's skiff, beckoned to Phil to join her. It was too undignified and hopeless for them to argue longer with these coarse, rough men. Phyllis followed her chum reluctantly. She hung back as long as she could, staring hard at the shanty boat. But there was no sight nor sound of Mollie.

Even after they were aboard Captain Mike's sailing craft Phil's eyes strained toward the receding shore. When it was no longer to be seen she sat with her hands folded, gazing into her lap. She was still thinking and planning what she could do to rescue Mollie. Madge sat with closed eyes; she was too weary to speak.

The sailor's boat had left the island far be-

hind and was moving swiftly. It was after sunset, and the sun had just thrown itself, like the golden ball in the fairy tale, into the depth of the clear water. The girls were looking anxiously toward the direction of their boat, and wondering if their friends were worrying over their late return.

The houseboat lay a little to the southwest of Fisherman's Island, and so far they had not been able to catch sight of it. It was growing so dark that it was impossible to see the shore very clearly on either side of the bay. It was Madge's sharp eyes that first made the discovery that what she could see of the shore was unfamiliar. Captain Mike was not taking them to their houseboat. He was sailing in exactly the opposite direction. Madge glanced quickly at Phyllis, who was yet happily unconscious of their plight, then, turning to Muldoon, she said sharply: "You are sailing the wrong way to bring us to our houseboat. The boat lies southwest of the island and you are taking us due north. Turn about and take us to our boat instantly."

"I am taking you to where I am going to land you, all right," the sailor replied gruffly. "You have got to learn that you can't come foolin' in my business without getting yourselves into trouble. I'm goin' to learn you."

"You had better do as we ask you to do or you may regret it," put in Phyllis.

The sailor appeared not to have heard her threat.

"Don't speak to him, Phil. He isn't worth wasting words over."

The sailboat was evidently making for the land. The long line of a pier was faintly visible. A few lights shone along a strange shore.

It was plain that Captain Mike meant to land at this pier. The girls did not know why he meant to take them there, but they were too proud to ask him his reason.

Mike drew his boat close along the flight of steps that led to the top of the pier.

"Jump off, quick!" he called sharply.

It was night. Neither Madge nor Phyllis had the faintest idea of the hour. Neither one of them knew in what place they were being cast ashore, nor had they a cent of money between them. But anything was better than to remain longer on the sailboat.

With a defiant glance at the scowling man Madge climbed out on the steps of the pier. She gave her hand to Phyllis, who leaped after her.

Captain Mike watched them walk up the steps to the top of the pier. Then, turning his boat about, he sailed away, leaving the two girls to the darkness of an unknown shore.

CHAPTER XIX

FINDING A WAY TO HELP MOLLIE

GIRLS do not keep silent long, no matter how grave the situation. The two castaways were no exception.

Madge shook her clenched fist after the retreating mast of the sail boat. "You horrid, horrid old man!" she cried. "We won't give up trying to save poor Mollie, no matter what you do to us. Come on, Phil," she said, taking Phyllis by the hand, "let us go up to the shore and ask some one where we are. I suppose nobody will believe our story, because it seems so improbable, but perhaps some kind soul will give us a drink of water, even if we do look perfectly disreputable."

Phyllis giggled softly in spite of their plight. Madge had lost her hat. Her curls had long since come loose from the knot in which she wore them, and her gown was sadly wrinkled.

Madge was in no mood for laughter. "You needn't make fun of me, Phyllis Alden," she said reproachfully. "You are just as tattered and torn as I. We do look like a couple of beggars. Your hair is not down, but your col-

lar is crumpled and your dress is almost as soiled as mine."

"I look much worse than you do, Madge, I am sure of it," conceded Phil cheerfully. "You see, I am not pretty to begin with." To this speech Madge would not deign to reply. Phyllis laughed good-humoredly. "Loyal little Madge, you won't acknowledge my lack of fatal beauty." Then in a graver tone she added, "What do you think we had better do, Madge?"

"Find out where we are and how far away the 'Merry Maid' is," returned Madge decisively. "We must reach there to-night, Phil. Miss Jenny Ann and the girls will believe something dreadful has happened to us."

The chums had walked to the end of the pier. Between them and the nearest house lay a stretch of treacherous marsh. They paused irresolutely, staring at the marsh with anxious eyes. "I am afraid we shall get lost in the marsh if we try to find our way through it on a dark night like this," faltered Phyllis.

Madge shook her head determinedly. "We must try to pass through it. I don't like the looks of it any better than you do, but we can't stay here all night, that is certain. Come on. Here goes."

Phyllis obediently followed her companion into the marsh, and then began a never-to-be-

forgotten walk. With each step they took the salt water oozed up from the ground and covered their shoes. Madge felt her way carefully. She was obliged to put one foot cautiously forth to see if the earth ahead were firm enough to bear the weight of her body. On she went, with Phyllis close behind her. In spite of the difficulty the girls were plainly making headway. "Hurrah!" called Madge, "we are almost out of this quagmire. There is dry land ahead!" With one long leap she made the solid ground which stretched just ahead of her. Phyllis was not so fortunate. She lunged blindly after Madge, struck an unusually bad part of the marsh and sank knee deep in the soft mud. With a terrified cry she began struggling to free herself, but the harder she struggled the deeper she became imbedded in the marsh.

The moon was just coming up. Madge could faintly see what had happened to her friend. She ran toward Phyllis, but the latter cried out warningly: "Go back. If you try to help me, you'll only sink into this marsh with me."

Madge hesitated only a minute. "Don't move, Phil, if you can possibly help it," she cried. "But in a few minutes from now call out, so that I can tell where you are. Good-bye for a little while; I am going for help." Madge never knew how she covered the space that lay be-

tween her and the nearest house. This house had a low stone wall around it, and stood on top of a steep hill that sloped down to this wall. Madge scrambled over the wall and climbed the hill, sometimes on her feet, but as often on her hands and knees. There was a light in a window. She staggered to it and rapped on the window pane. A moment later a man appeared in a doorway at the right of the window.

"Who's there?" he called out sharply. "What do you mean by knocking on my window? Answer me at once!"

Madge stumbled over to him. "Oh, won't you please come with me?" she said. "My friend Phyllis is stuck fast in the marsh. I must have help to get her out."

Without a word the man disappeared into the house. For one dreadful instant, Madge thought he did not intend to help her; she thought he must believe that she was an impostor and was making up her story. The next minute the man returned, wearing a pair of high rubber boots and carrying a dark lantern and a heavy rope.

"Don't be frightened," he said kindly to her as she walked wearily after him. "People often lose their way in this marsh after dark. We'll soon find your friend."

But to himself Judge Arthur Hilliard asked the question: "What in the world are two young

girls doing alone on this dangerous shore at such an hour of the night?"

It was well that Phyllis remembered Madge's order, else they might have had some trouble in locating her. As soon as Phyllis saw the friendly light from the oncoming lantern she called at the top of her lungs: "Here I am! Here I am!"

"Keep perfectly still!" Judge Hilliard commanded. "I'll have you out in a short time." He waded into the marsh, his high boots protecting him from the black ooze. When he was about five yards from Phil he flung her the rope. "Now work your way along toward us," he directed. Phyllis obeyed his command and in an incredibly short time was safe on dry land, her shoes heavy with mud.

"It is bad enough to be lost," declared Phil as she thanked the stranger, "but it is worse to be not only lost, but stuck in the mud as well."

"You were in a most unpleasant, though I can hardly say a dangerous plight," returned the stranger. "Can I be of further service to you?"

"Would you—could you tell us where we can get a drink of water?" asked Madge. "We are so tired and thirsty."

"My name is Arthur Hilliard," returned the man. "If you will come to my house, my mother will be glad to offer you refreshment."

"Thank you," bowed Madge sedately. "We will go with you."

Mrs. Hilliard, a stout, comfortable looking old lady, received the wanderers with true Southern hospitality. Without waiting to hear their story, she insisted that they change their bedraggled clothing for two comfortable looking dressing gowns which she laid out for them, and by the time they had washed their faces and hands and dressed their hair they found a hot supper ready for them in the dining room.

"We are so sorry to have troubled you," declared Madge apologetically, as Mr. Hilliard entered the dining room when they were finishing their meal. "Now we must tell you who we are and how we came to be floundering in the marsh so late in the evening."

Beginning with their visit to the island that morning Madge related all that had transpired during that long day of adventures. Judge Hilliard shook his head disapprovingly as the tale continued, but listened with grave interest to the part of the story relating to Mollie, the sailor's daughter.

"This girl of whom you speak is like the girl in the fairy story, who has a cruel step-mother and an ogre of a father," he commented when the story had ended.

"Of course she is," answered Madge; "only

our girl is not in a fairy story, she is real. I can't believe that that dreadful Mike Muldoon is her father, and I know there must be some way to take her from him and make her happy."

"We are going to save her yet," declared Phyllis stoutly. "I don't see just how we are to manage it, but to-morrow we are going to try again. How far are we from Fisherman's Island?"

"About thirty miles," Judge Hilliard replied. "I have telephoned to the nearest town to let your chaperon know you are safe. The message will be taken over to your houseboat to-night, and I will take you home in the morning. My mother insists that you remain here to-night. She will join us in the library in a few minutes."

"Thank you again," said Madge gratefully. "It was very thoughtful in you to send a message to our friends. In the morning we wish to go first to the Belleview Hotel. We wish to see a friend of ours who is staying there. Her name is Mrs. Curtis."

"Mrs. Curtis is an old friend of mine," said Judge Hilliard in pleased surprise "I have known her ever since I was a little boy. Now I have something to say to you that may interest you. I told you I was a judge. It is my business to look into people's legal difficulties. This

trouble which concerns your friend looks to me as though it might have a legal side to it. We are in the State of Maryland. Fisherman's Island is in my jurisdiction. Suppose I issue an injunction forbidding the marriage between Mollie and the sailor, and take you up to the island in the morning to see it served. I have a steam yacht, and I think I shall take along two court officers or policemen, who will terrify your dreadful Captain Mike. At any rate, I'll see justice done his afflicted daughter, if I have to take the law in my own hands."

Madge clapped her hands joyously. Tears stood in Phil's dark eyes. "Oh, how splendid!" she breathed.

At this juncture Mrs. Hilliard entered the library, and after a little further talk the two girls announced themselves as being quite ready to retire.

"Be ready at seven o'clock," Judge Hilliard reminded them, as he bade his guests good night. "We shall reach Captain Mike's shanty boat before he has time to proceed with the marriage. They won't expect you at your houseboat until after breakfast, and I hope to have three girls to deliver aboard, instead of two."

Phyllis and Madge dropped asleep that night the instant their heads touched their pillows. They had asked to share the same room, and as

they had sleepily undressed, they congratulated each other on the fact that Mike Muldoon's cowardly act had resulted in nothing but good to them. It looked as though it might even prove a boomerang to him.

By seven o'clock the next morning the girls had breakfasted and said good-bye to Mrs. Hilliard, after promising to visit her at some future time.

"Judge Hilliard," announced Madge, as the yacht "Greyhound" steamed out from the pier, "we forgot to tell you last night that we think Mollie is old enough to come away from her father if she wishes. She doesn't know how old she is. That is one of the queer things about Mollie. She seems quite sensible until you ask her to recall something, and then she becomes confused. Still, I am sure she is several years older than either Phil or I."

The shanty boat colony on the east side of Fisherman's Island had also risen early on this warm morning in July. Bill crossed over to the mainland in his sailboat to bring a Justice of the Peace back with him to marry him to Mollie. Captain Mike was determined to have his way with his daughter. Once she was married to Bill, her new friends would find it difficult to get her away from him.

Since Mollie's return to the shanty boat she

had made no further outcry. She did not seem to know what was going on. The vacant, hopeless look had come over her face. The fright and ill treatment of the day before had completely subdued her. She seemed to have forgotten everything.

All night long she had lain awake in her miserable berth in the dirty shanty boat. She lay still, with her eyes closed, until the breathing of her family told her they were fast asleep. Then she crept out on the deck of the boat. She sat for hours without moving, her wonderful blue eyes, with the empty look in them, staring out over the silent waters. She was waiting, wistful and patient, for something to come to save her. When the dawn broke, and a rosy light bathed the bay and the sky, she rose, went quietly into the cabin and lay down in her berth again. She stayed there while the family ate their breakfast. She made no resistance when her stepmother came toward her, grinning maliciously, and bearing a coarse white cotton dress, which she called "Moll's wedding gown."

Mollie let the woman put the dress on her. She even combed her own sun-colored hair; and, for the first time in her life, she knotted it on her head, instead of letting it stream in ragged, unkempt ends over her shoulders. A loose lock of hair over Mollie's low forehead covered the

ugly scar that was her one disfigurement. She was so startlingly lovely that her stupid step-mother stared at her in a kind of bewildered amazement. Mollie was pale and worn, and painfully thin, yet nothing could spoil the wonderful color of her hair and eyes, nor take away the peculiar grace of her figure. Her expression was dull and listless. Even so Mollie looked like a lily transplanted to some field of dank weeds, but growing tall and sweet amid their ugliness.

Mike looked at his daughter curiously when her step-mother dragged her out before him. Brutal as he was, a change passed over his face. He glanced over the water to see if Bill's boat were approaching. "I ain't never understood how things has turned out," he muttered to himself. "If Mollie wasn't foolish, I wouldn't let Bill have her. She is a pretty thing, and she looks like a lady. That's what makes it so all-fired queer."

Mollie sank down on the bench that ran around the deck of the shanty boat. She dropped her head in her hands. What she was thinking, or whether she was thinking at all, no one could know or tell. She heard a boat coming through the water, then a cry from her father. If she believed the hour had arrived for her marriage, she gave no sign. She did not raise her head when Mike Muldoon cried out savagely.

Captain Mike went ashore. He stood with his heavy arms folded, smoking and scowling.

Judge Hilliard stepped up to Captain Mike. Two police officers accompanied him. Madge and Phil were directly behind their new friend. They did not like to call to Mollie, but they wished she would look up at them.

"I have an injunction forbidding the marriage of your daughter, Mollie Muldoon, to a fisherman named Bill," Judge Hilliard's peremptory voice rang out. "You are forcing your daughter into this marriage against her will."

"I ain't forcing Moll," denied Captain Mike, glaring at Phil and Madge. He was driven into a corner, and he knew nothing else to say.

"I would like to ask the girl what she desires," the judge announced.

"Moll," called Mike.

For the first time Mollie lifted her head. She left the boat and came slowly toward the little party.

Judge Hilliard stared, and for a moment he forgot to speak to her. Madge and Phil had assured him that their protégé was beautiful, but he had expected to behold the simple beauty of a country girl; this young woman was exquisitely lovely.

Madge and Phil trembled with excitement. Suppose Mollie should not understand the

Judge's question and make the wrong answer? Suppose the poor girl had been bullied into submission? Suppose she should not even recall the struggle of yesterday? She forgot so much —would she forget this?

"Do you desire to marry this 'Bill'?" Judge Hilliard queried, looking with puzzled wonder into Mollie's lovely, expressionless face.

Mollie shook her head gently. Madge and Phil held their breath.

"I will not marry him," Mollie answered simply. "Nothing could make me do so."

"Then you will come home to the houseboat with us, Mollie," Madge and Phil pleaded together, taking hold of the girl's hands to lead her away.

"I am sorry," interposed Judge Hilliard, speaking to the girls, "but we can't take her away at once. We must observe the law. Muldoon," continued the Judge as he took a document out of his pocket and handed it to the sailor, "of course you know that you can not force this girl to marry against her will whether she is of age or not, but, aside from that, here is an order of court directing you to show cause why the girl should not be taken from you upon the ground of cruelty and neglect. The case will be heard in the court at the county seat of Anne Arundel County five days hence, the 30th

of the month. You will, of course, be expected to prove that the girl is your daughter. This order also contains an injunction forbidding you to take the girl out of this jurisdiction within that time. These officers will remain here to see that the order of the court is carried out. If you make any attempt to remove the girl from this vicinity, you will be arrested at once."

"And now, ladies," said Judge Hilliard, turning to the girls, "we will go aboard the 'Greyhound'."

"I say, Judge," broke in Muldoon, starting hurriedly after Judge Hilliard, "I don't want to get mixed up in the law. I'll tell you something if you won't be too hard on me. Moll isn't my daughter! I picked her up almost drowned on a beach on the coast of Florida. My first old woman took a liking for the kid, so we just kept her. We didn't intend her any harm. That was ten or twelve years ago."

Judge Hilliard did not appear to be surprised; in fact, he had expected some such statement.

"Your confession," said he, speaking to Muldoon, "is all we need to enable us to take this girl away. Under the circumstances, it will not be necessary to serve this paper," he continued, taking the order of court away from Muldoon. "We shall take the girl with us now. Muldoon,

see to it that you don't get into any other trouble. You are getting off easily. Your carrying off these two young ladies under false pretence and depositing them against their will in an unknown place, as you did last night, is very much like abduction, and abduction is a penitentiary offence."

There being nothing left to do, Judge Hilliard and his party, now including the rescued Mollie, went aboard the "Greyhound" and steamed away toward the houseboat.

CHAPTER XX

MADGE'S OPPORTUNITY

MOLLIE slipped into her place as a member of the little houseboat family as quietly as though she had always been a part of it. She was shy and gentle, and rarely talked. She was more like a timid child than a woman. She liked to cook, to wash the dishes, to do the things to which she was accustomed, and to be left alone. At first the houseboat girls tried to interest her in their amusements, but Miss Jenny Ann persuaded them that it was wiser to let Mollie become accustomed to the change in her life in any way she could. Mollie never spoke of the past, and she seemed worried if any one of the girls questioned her about it. They did not even know whether she feared the return of Captain Mike or Bill. The girls hoped that Mollie's lack of memory had made her quickly forget her unhappy life.

One thing haunted Mollie: it was her fear of strangers. If a visitor came aboard the houseboat the young girl would disappear and hide in the cabin until there was no danger of her being noticed. Jack Bolling and Tom Curtis came calling nearly every day, but neither one of

them had seen anything of Mollie, except her flying skirts as she ran away to hide from them. They were vaguely aware of her unusual beauty, but neither of them knew what she actually looked like.

Madge was particularly sorry that Mollie would not see Mrs. Curtis. The houseboat holiday could only last a short time longer. Mr. and Mrs. Butler had written that they expected to return from California in about ten days, and must have Madge and Eleanor back at "Forest House." Lillian's and Phil's parents were also clamoring for their girls to spend a part of their summer vacation at home. So the question must soon arise: What could be done with Mollie when the crew of the "Merry Maid" disbanded? Madge felt they needed their friend's advice. But neither Mrs. Curtis nor Miss Jenny Ann thought it best to force Mollie to see people until she became more used to the atmosphere of affection about her, and had learned that no one meant to harm or ill treat her. Once Mrs. Curtis caught a brief glimpse of Mollie, standing framed in the cabin doorway. The girl had given a frightened stare at her, and then had fled inside her room. She could not be coaxed out again. Mrs. Curtis was curious. The one quick look at Mollie seemed oddly to recall some friend of her youth. It was nothing

to think of seriously. She would know better when she saw the girl another time.

Daily Mrs. Curtis seemed to grow more and more fond of Madge. If Madge failed to come to see her every day or so, she would send Tom over as a messenger to bring her little friend back with him to luncheon or to dinner. She and the little captain used to have long, confidential talks together, and Mrs. Curtis seemed never to weary of the young girl's romantic fancies. She used to make Madge tell her of her family and what she knew of her dead father and mother. At times Madge wondered idly why Mrs. Curtis was interested in them, and every now and then she thought Tom's mother wished to ask her an important question. But Mrs. Curtis always put off the inquiry until another time.

Toward the close of their stay on the "Merry Maid" the girls were invited to a six o'clock dinner at the Belleview, given in their honor by Mrs. Curtis and Tom. On the day of the dinner Tom was sent to the "Merry Maid" to ask Madge to come to his mother an hour earlier than the others were expected. Miss Jenny Ann had elected to stay at home with Mollie. Nothing would induce Mollie to attend the party, and Miss Jenny Ann would not allow any one of the girls to remain on the houseboat with her.

Tom and Madge went up to the hotel on the street car, since it was impossible for Tom to row with his lame arm. They found Mrs. Curtis on a little balcony that opened off her private sitting-room. The piazza overlooked the waters of the small bay. It was a wonderful summer afternoon; white clouds were rioting everywhere in the clear, blue sky; the water was astir with white-masted boats, dipping their sails toward the waves like the flapping wings of sea gulls.

Madge was looking her prettiest. She had on her best white frock, and as a mark of her appreciation of Mrs. Curtis wore the string of pearls about her throat. Without making any noise, she crept out on the balcony and kissed Mrs. Curtis lightly on the forehead. Then she dropped into a low, cushioned chair near her friend's side.

"Here I am, dressed for the dinner," she announced happily. "How do you like me? Tom said you wanted me to come before the other girls, and that this was perhaps our farewell dinner with you, for you might be going away in a few days. Dear me, I am sorry. Are you going to Old Point Comfort for the rest of the summer, or to your own summer place?"

Mrs. Curtis shook her head. "I don't know, Madge, just where I shall go," she answered, pushing Madge's curls to one side of her white

forehead. It was the way that Mrs. Curtis liked best to have Madge wear her hair. "But, wherever we go, can't you go with us?" she concluded.

Madge sighed. "I'd love to go with you," she sighed, "but I can't. You see, Nellie and I have to go back to 'Forest House' to spend the rest of our holiday with Uncle and Aunt. They would be dreadfully hurt if I suggested making a visit to you, instead of coming home to them."

"Then I wonder if your uncle and aunt would allow me to make them a short visit?" questioned Mrs. Curtis gravely.

Madge opened her blue eyes. Why in the world should Mrs. Curtis wish to go to "Forest House"? But she answered her friend promptly. "Of course Uncle and Aunt would be most happy to have you, and Nellie and I would be perfectly delighted."

"Why do you think I am anxious to come, Madge?"

Madge smiled in her sauciest fashion. "To see me, of course," she replied. "Doesn't that sound conceited?"

But Mrs. Curtis was not smiling. She was looking at Madge so seriously that the young girl's merry face sobered.

"I am not coming merely to see you, dear. I am coming to ask if I may take you away with

"I Wish You to Come and Live With Me, Madge."

me for always. Haven't you guessed that I want you to come to live with me, to be my daughter? Tom and I are lonely. My husband is dead, and I have no other child now, except Tom. I can't tell you how much I want a daughter. I have plenty of money, dear—more than I know what to do with. So we could have wonderful times together, and do anything we chose to do. Only I would wish you with me all the time. I couldn't let you wander off with the girls or go to boarding school. Tom has to be away so much. You haven't any own father and mother, and you told me that you were poor and would have to earn your living some day. So I thought perhaps your uncle and aunt would give you up to me. But, first, I wish to know whether my plan pleases you."

Mrs. Curtis stopped talking to gaze earnestly at Madge. The girl had turned so white that her friend was startled. She did not realize what a surprise her suggestion had been to the little captain. She believed that Madge must have partly guessed her intention. Miss Jenny Ann and Phil had understood that some day Mrs. Curtis might make just this proposal to Madge Morton. But to Madge it was a complete surprise. She had never for an instant dreamed of such a thing.

In a moment all the young girl's familiar

world fell broken at her feet—the old childhood home in the country, her happy friendships at school. She saw a new world, like a vision in a fairy tale. It was a wonderful world, that contained all the marvels of which she had dreamed —wealth, position, admiration. Yet it was a homesick world, for it was peopled with few of the friends whom Madge loved, with none of the familiar places. In spite of the girl's fancies, the actual every-day life of poverty and hope was too dear to be laid lightly aside.

Mrs. Curtis still waited for Madge to speak.

"Uncle and Aunt——" she faltered. "They—would miss me——"

"Yes, I know," returned Mrs. Curtis sympathetically. "Of course, your own people will find it hard to give you up just at first, and Eleanor will miss you. But I do not believe your uncle and aunt will stand in your way if you really wish to come to me."

Mrs. Curtis concluded in the tone of a woman accustomed to having her own way. She was puzzled at Madge's indecision.

"Are you sure you care for me enough to wish me to live with you, Mrs. Curtis?" asked Madge quietly. "You see, you know only the nicest part of me, but I have a miserable temper. Nellie and my friends are used to me. Suppose you should take me away to live with you, and then

grow tired of me?" The girl's clear eyes questioned her new friend gravely.

Mrs. Curtis smiled and shook her head. "No; I shouldn't grow tired of you. People may sometimes grow vexed with you, but they are not going to become tired of you. Now sit quite still. I want you not to speak, but to think very hard for three minutes and then to tell me whether you wish to be my adopted daughter. I do not wish to trouble your uncle and aunt unless you feel sure of yourself."

Mrs. Curtis took out her watch and laid it in her lap.

She did not look at the watch; she kept her gaze on Madge's face.

The little captain did not speak. She knew her eyes were filled with tears. She was so young, and it was hard to decide her whole future life in the space of three minutes. She realized that if Mrs. Curtis adopted her, she would have to give up her gay, independent existence among her old friends, the joy of doing for herself and of learning to overcome obstacles. Then, on the other hand, Mrs. Curtis loved her and she would give her everything in the world that a young girl could desire.

"Mrs. Curtis," declared Madge, when the three minutes had gone by, "I can't—I can't decide what you ask me now. Please don't think

I do not love you. It is too wonderful for you and Tom to wish me to come to live with you. But may I have a few days to think things over before I give you my answer? The thought of leaving Aunt Sue and Uncle William and Nellie does—does——" Madge could not go on.

"Never mind, dear," soothed Mrs. Curtis. "It was not fair in me to take you unawares, and then expect you to make up your mind so soon. Suppose I give you three days, instead of three minutes, to think things over. Even then, Madge, we can't be sure that your uncle and aunt will be willing to let you be my girl instead of theirs."

CHAPTER XXI

MOLLIE'S BRAVE FIGHT

MOLLIE was sitting alone on the deck of the houseboat. She and Miss Jenny had just finished an early tea. The girls were still away at their dinner, and Miss Jenny Ann had gone up to the nearest farmhouse to get some eggs for breakfast. It was the first time Mollie had ever been left by herself on the houseboat. But Miss Jenny Ann did not think there was any possible danger. Neither Captain Mike nor Bill had made the slightest attempt to get possession of Mollie. Nor did Miss Jones intend to be out of call for more than fifteen minutes.

Mollie had begun to lose the vague dread that had haunted her all her life. The peaceful hours of the past ten days seemed more real to her than the dreary, ugly years of her childhood. She began faintly to realize what life could mean when one was not afraid.

Mollie's hands, a little roughened from hard work, were folded peacefully in her lap. Her beautiful head, with its crown of sun-colored hair, was resting against the cushion of the big steamer chair. She was on the small upper

deck, facing the bow of the boat. A strolling breeze had blown the hair back from her forehead, and the ugly scar was visible. But, now that Mollie's head no longer ached from the hard work she had been forced to endure, the throbbing and the old pain in this scar had almost gone. The girl was slowly finding herself. So far she had accepted her new life without a question, taking what was done for her like a contented child. Now she sat looking up the bay for the return of her friends. They would not be at home for several hours, but time meant very little to Mollie, and she had been lonely since they had gone away.

A skiff came down the bay with a single figure seated in it.

Mollie heard the faint splashing of the oars, but since water sounds had been familiar to her all her life she did not even turn her head to see if any one were coming near to the houseboat. She knew the girls were due from the other direction.

The boat moved slowly in toward the shore. It made almost no sound, now that it drew nearer the land. With a final dip of the oars and a strong forward movement the small boat glided well within the shadow of the stern of the houseboat. There it stopped.

Mollie did not see nor hear it. For some mo-

ments the boat rested quietly in the shallow water, moving only with the faint movement of the evening tide. The solitary boatman sat without stirring. He leaned forward, listening intently for any sounds of life aboard the houseboat. He had espied the deserted figure on the upper deck.

In almost complete silence the man fastened his boat to the houseboat and in his stocking feet clambered up the side of "The Merry Maid" and came aboard. He slipped around the deck, crouching on his hands and knees. He listened at the doors of each room in the cabin. No one was about except the girl in the steamer chair. The man moved like a cat, with almost complete noiselessness. He made no effort to enter the deserted cabin. Nor did he, at first, make any movement that showed the least interest in Mollie.

At the farther end of the deck, outside the kitchen, the prowler made a discovery which caused him great satisfaction. He smiled. He picked it up and shook it furtively. The treasure was a big tin can, nearly full of kerosene.

Still on his hands and knees, the man tilted the can until the oil ran in a little stream down the deck and soaked well into the wood. He then put his hand in his pocket to look for something.

Mollie did not hear him. At least, her ears

were not conscious that they caught a distinct sound. Finally she became conscious of the presence of some one near her. She got quickly up out of her chair and leaned over the railing of the top deck.

At this moment the man, with his back toward her, struck a match. Mollie beheld the crouching figure. She could not tell who the man was. Was it Bill or her father come to steal her away? The old, dreadful fear swept over her, with enough of memory to make her realize what her capture would mean. The girl's first instinct was to hide. She did not realize how poor a refuge the houseboat offered her. It seemed to her that, if she could only get into one of the cabin bedrooms and conceal herself in her berth, she might escape. Poor Mollie had no better idea to aid her. She came running down the outside steps and ran toward the cabin door.

The man rose quickly. He did not move toward Mollie. Outside the cabin kitchen was a big box filled with chips and bits of kindling, used to light the kitchen stove. The man gathered up a handful of these pieces of wood and ran back to his old position. He glanced at Mollie. But it was easy to see that she was trying to get away, not to hinder him in what he was doing. He picked up the oil can again. This time he poured the few remaining drops on

a little pile of chips and lit another match. The tinder blazed up. The man fanned the tiny flames with the brim of a torn hat. The flare of light grew brighter; a great flame leapt up and then a snake-like curve of fire followed the oil-soaked wood.

When the man did not move toward Mollie she stopped in the cabin door. She was afraid of him. She was not like other girls. Ever since she had been able to know anything she had felt a curious, confused feeling in her head. She did not know who the man was on the deck of the boat. But she did know that he was trying to set their houseboat afire.

Mollie paid no further attention to the man. She did not scream at him, nor try to stop what he was doing. She rushed forward and began stamping on the pile of blazing sticks.

The man did not attempt to prevent her. He was watching the increasing length of flame spread over the deck. A second later he sprang up, ran across the deck, slipped over the side of "The Merry Maid," dropped into his rowboat, and rowed swiftly out of sight.

Mollie flew for the big bucket of water, which they always kept in a certain spot. She flung the water on the flames, but water will not quench the flames made from oil. The rail began to crackle, the sparks to fly. "The Merry

Maid" was afire, with only one, feeble girl to save it!

Mollie knew that there were steamer blankets in the bedrooms of the cabin. She often had one to cover her when she took her afternoon rest. Remember, Mollie had had little education, but she had been brought up to work and to do practical tasks. It was but the work of a moment to drag out two blankets and spread them over the flames. The fire died down for a moment; then it crept through the fringe of the rugs, and a choking smell of burning wool showed that the blankets also were beginning to burn. But the brave girl had no intention of giving up the fight.

There were two other blankets left. Mollie started back to the cabin for these, when to her terror she discovered that the skirt of her cotton dress was in flames. She tried to beat it out with her hands, but it crept steadily up toward her head. She cried aloud, but she could see no one coming to save her. The pain was more intense every moment. She could not keep still. She ran toward the edge of the deck. Before her the placid water lay cool and sweet. With a cry of pain, Mollie threw herself over the side of the houseboat. She did not realize how shallow the water was. She flung herself with all her force. Her head struck against

the bottom with a heavy thud. At least the water was cool; the fire no longer burned her.

Miss Jones and Mr. Brown, who had joined Miss Jenny Ann on her way back from the farmhouse, heard Mollie's first cry of alarm. The artist had been coming down to the houseboat to make an evening call. Two strangers, a man and his wife, were strolling along the top of the small embankment. They also heard the call. The four of them started down the hill almost at the same time. Before they reached the houseboat, the odor of burning wood was borne to their nostrils. Miss Jenny Ann cried out for Mollie, but Mollie did not answer. Mr. Brown and the two strangers began beating out the fire on the boat. It had not spread far; the blankets had covered the flames and kept them from increasing. The overturned oil can gave the clue to the mystery. Mr. Brown dashed into the kitchen for a bag of salt, because salt more quickly puts out the flames from burning oil.

Miss Jenny Ann had, so far, been unable to find Mollie. Now she looked over the side of the boat, and Mollie's body could be plainly seen lying in the shallow water. Mr. Brown and the stranger together brought the girl back to the houseboat. She was insensible. In her plunge into the water she had struck her head

with great force against the bottom of the bay. She was stunned by the shock, and when she returned to consciousness the pain from the burn and the blow made her delirious. As she alone could tell what had transpired in that brief hour, the cause of the fire remained a mystery.

CHAPTER XXII

THE EVIL GENIUS

"I THINK I had better go up to the hotel to prepare the girls for what has happened," suggested Mr. Brown a short time afterward.

Miss Jenny Ann seemed surprised at the thought of his leaving her alone with Mollie, and said so.

"Yes; I think I had better go at once," he announced decisively. "The doctor will be here in a few minutes. I can do nothing for you or for Mollie, but I can save the girls from the shock of returning to find their houseboat damaged and their friend so ill."

Miss Jenny Ann agreed quietly. If Mr. Brown thought it best to go, it did not really matter. "Ask the girls to come home as soon as they can," she added. "Phil is so clever in cases of illness."

"I'll borrow the 'Water Witch.' I think I can get up to the Belleview quicker if I go by water than if I wait for the street car to take me there. The girls will bring the boat home with them."

Mr. Brown disappeared from the deck of the boat a few moments later. He climbed into

the "Water Witch" and rowed very swiftly up the bay.

Miss Jones had taken it for granted that their houseboat had caught fire by accident. She had not had time to give much thought to the matter. But Mr. Brown had other views. He remembered the boy who had attempted the robbery, and he had other reasons for his suspicions. A can of oil might very easily have turned over on the deck, but was there any reason to suppose that a pile of matches would be left lying at one side of the can? The young artist meant to make a thorough search for the possible offender. He wished to get out on the water as soon as he could, because he believed the incendiary had escaped that way. Mr. Brown and Miss Jenny Ann had been walking down the embankment at the very time the trespasser must have made his escape. If he had gone by land, one of them must have caught sight of him.

Theodore Brown was an ex-member of a Yale boat crew. He made the "Water Witch" skim through the waters, and at the same time he kept a sharp lookout for a small boat. There were a number of skiffs filled with young girls and men. But Mr. Brown was looking for a boat with the single figure of a boy in it.

He went toward the hotel, believing that the

boatman would feel more secure if he were swallowed up in a crowd, than if he were seen in a more deserted part of the bay. Mr. Brown had almost reached the hotel pier before he came up to the character of skiff he desired to find. Then he was embarrassed how to accost the young man in it, as it was possible for him to see only the oarsman's back. Mr. Brown came as close up alongside the stranger's boat as he could. Still he could not see the man's face. He leaned out of his own boat and called: "I want to drift along here and smoke. Would you be kind enough to lend me a match?"

The other oarsman apparently did not hear him. He rowed on faster. Again Mr. Brown caught up with him. He called, in an even more friendly fashion, "Haven't you that match?"

The stranger fumbled a minute in his pocket. "Sorry to disoblige you," he answered. "I haven't a match about me."

Theodore Brown laughed. The two small boats were almost touching each other. "Sorry to have troubled you," continued Mr. Brown, leaning as far over the side of his boat as he could. "After all, I find I have some matches in my own pocket. You had better take a cigar to show you forgive me for annoying you."

The artist struck a light and held it for a moment full in the other oarsman's face. It was

only a second; the light flickered and went out.

The man in the boat winced as the light shone on his face. "No, thank you; I don't smoke," he answered politely. With that he shot his skiff on ahead.

Mr. Brown followed behind him. He saw the other man was about to land at a deserted beach a short distance to the left of the Belleview Hotel pier. Mr. Brown did not make for the same shore immediately. He waited until the man was on land and striding out of sight; then the artist jumped from his own boat and went after the other man. Not many yards away was the side lawn of the hotel. It was a warm summer night, and a number of guests were strolling about under the trees. Mr. Brown put his hand on the arm of the fellow whom he had been following.

The boy leaped forward in an effort to wrench himself away. At this moment he recognized the artist and knew he had been overtaken. Mr. Brown kept a firm hold on his arm.

"What do you want with me?" demanded the lad, trying to appear at his ease. "Aren't you the fellow who came alongside of me in the boat?"

"I am," was the curt reply, "and I don't wish to ask a great favor of you. I simply wish you to come over to the hotel with me to see some

friends of mine. We would like to ask you a few questions. Of course, if you can answer them satisfactorily, I shall let you go with my best apologies. I would advise you not to make any resistance here. You will attract the attention of the people on the lawn."

Mrs. Curtis and her guests were rather surprised when a hotel boy came up to her sitting room to say that Mr. Theodore Brown and some one else would like to speak to Mr. Tom Curtis for a few minutes, if that were possible.

Tom came back to his mother a little later, his eyes flashing. He related a part of Mr. Brown's story.

"If you don't mind, Mother, I think we had better have the fellow up here for the girls to see. I know he is the man who took the sailboat from Madge and me, and Mr. Brown says he is the fellow who attempted to rob the houseboat; but whether he has set it afire and nearly been the death of Mollie, we have no way of finding out. He vows he has not been near the houseboat since the day he promised never to return. If we cross-examine him up here, perhaps we can get at the truth."

Eleanor had slipped out of the room to find her coat and hat as soon as she learned of the accident to Mollie. The other young women were trembling with sympathy and alarm, but

they waited to see the boy brought upstairs.

The girls were not long in agreeing to the identity of the prisoner as the evil genius of their past experiences. But there was no way of proving that he had actually set fire to the houseboat, for he still absolutely denied all knowledge of it.

Eleanor came back to the sitting-room. "Aren't you ready to leave, girls?" she demanded. "Miss Jenny Ann and Mollie need us."

Eleanor sniffed the air daintily. "What is that curious odor of kerosene, Mrs. Curtis?" she inquired curiously. "Do you think any of the lamps could be leaking?"

"Good!" Mr. Brown ejaculated. "What a chump I am! I have been conscious of that smell all this time and had not associated it with the houseboat."

Mr. Brown put his nose down to his prisoner's hands. Then he inhaled the scent of his coat. Tom Curtis followed suit. The odor was unmistakable. The lad was well smeared with oil. The circumstantial evidence was strong against the captured boy when Mr. Brown related the discovery of the overturned can and the spread of the kerosene on the houseboat deck.

"I am awfully sorry to have made this scene,

Mrs. Curtis," apologized the young artist, "but I knew no other way for us to settle the matter at once. This young man has done too much mischief to our friends to be allowed to go free again. But you need not think further of the experience, I'll take the lad and give him up to the police to-night. Your son and I will be able to identify him. It will not be necessary to draw you girls into the business. We can manage without you."

Mrs. Curtis looked exceedingly uncomfortable. She had been bitterly angry at the way the lad had served Tom and Madge, and at that time she would have given a great deal to have had him properly punished. Since then he had added one evil deed to the other. But the boy, who was being led away to prison, seemed so young, not much older than Tom. He was wild and reckless in his appearance, yet he had the aspect of having been born of gentle people.

The youth had not spoken since the discovery of the oil on his hands and clothes. Now, as he was being led from the sitting room, he turned on his cross-questioners and shook with swift laughter. He threw back his head, so that his long, dark hair uncovered his ears. His eyes gleamed.

Madge, who was staring hard at the boy from her position on the far side of the room, gave

an unexpected movement of surprise. She waited for the young prisoner to speak.

"You needn't trouble your girls to appear against me," he said savagely, "but you will have to introduce their chaperon in court, and a pretty thing it will be for a sister to appear as a witness against her own brother!"

A frozen silence fell on the group of listeners. Phil shook her head emphatically. "You are not our Miss Jenny Ann's brother," she retorted decidedly. "It would be perfectly impossible for her to have a wicked brother like you."

Theodore Brown's face flushed and paled. He would have liked to drag the lad out of the room without waiting another instant. Yet he feared to make the scene even worse. He did not have the slightest faith in the lad's statement; he was only fiercely angry at the boy's impudence and wondered if the fellow even knew the name of the chaperon of the "Merry Maid."

Lillian and Eleanor were flushed with indignation. Tom Curtis was equally so. But Mrs. Curtis happened to catch a glimpse of Madge's face. Her expression was a puzzle. She ran forward and touched Mr. Brown on the sleeve. "Wait a minute, Mr. Brown," she pleaded. "Don't take the boy to jail yet. What he says

may be true. Don't you think we ought to ask him some questions first?"

The entire company stared at Madge in amazement. But in the single moment when Mr. Brown's captive started to leave the room, the little captain had seen the tips of his pointed ears. She had caught the wild, almost animal gleam in his eyes. She recalled the midnight visitor to their chaperon on the first night their houseboat had rested at anchor. She remembered Miss Jenny Ann's curious behavior, and how she had absolutely refused to give the name of her caller. All this swept through Madge's mind and now she understood Miss Jenny Ann's poverty, her reticence about her own affairs, her unhappiness when the girls first knew her at school. Of course, this wicked brother was the cause of their chaperon's difficulties. If they punished the boy, Miss Jenny Ann must suffer more than he would. She had lately grown to be as merry as any of the girls on board the "Merry Maid."

"O Mrs. Curtis!" exclaimed Madge, "please don't let Tom and Mr. Brown take him off to jail. I think he *is* our Miss Jenny Ann's brother. I wouldn't have her find out the wicked things he has done for all the money in the world." Madge was almost in tears as she made her plea to Mrs. Curtis.

"Never mind, dear," replied Mrs. Curtis soothingly. "If the lad really turns out to be your chaperon's brother, you are right; his behavior must be kept a secret from her."

Mrs. Curtis, Mr. Brown and Tom afterward found the statement of the wild boy to be true. He was really Miss Jones's brother. His parents had died when he was a little boy, and his sister had sacrificed her life's hopes to him. Yet her efforts had been in vain. He had always been hard to control. In the last few years he had broken away from all restraint. He had been concealed in the motor boat that first towed the girls and their chaperon to their anchorage and had seen his sister on the houseboat. His plan had been to get money from her. When she told him that she had none to give him he had devoted his time to tormenting the crew of the "Merry Maid" in order to be revenged on his sister.

After long consultation it was decided not to send him to prison. Mrs. Curtis gave him the money to sail for South Africa, after making him promise to try to turn over a new leaf, and not to write to his sister until he was safely out of the country. And so Miss Jenny Ann's ghost was laid without her knowing it until some time afterward.

CHAPTER XXIII

"MOTHER"

NOT one of the four girls closed her eyes during the long night following the dinner given by Mrs. Curtis. Miss Jenny Ann sat by Mollie until toward morning, when Eleanor and Lillian relieved her. Madge and Phil walked up and down the deck in order to be ready if they were called. But as the long night wore on, Mollie exhibited no sign of returning consciousness.

After an early breakfast the next morning Miss Jones went back to her charge, and the girls lingered in the cabin sitting room talking together in low tones.

Madge kept her arms about Eleanor. Every now and then she would lean over to kiss her cousin.

Nellie laughed softly. "What's the matter, Madge? Why are you so affectionate with me all of a sudden? Does it make you care more for me because poor, lovely Mollie is so ill, and because it might just as easily have been me, or Phil, or Lillian?"

Madge nodded. "Perhaps that is the reason."

Neither Lillian nor Eleanor even faintly

dreamed that their friend had anything on her mind to worry her, except the critical condition poor Mollie was in; but Phil knew differently. She had long suspected what Mrs. Curtis's preference for Madge meant. Phyllis and Miss Jenny Ann had even discussed the possibility of their captain leaving them. However, Phil had never broached the subject to Madge. She Phil couldn't, she wouldn't think of it.

Mrs. Curtis and Tom arrived at the houseboat just as Madge and Phil were about to relieve Miss Jenny Ann's second watch. The physician had said that he expected Mollie to regain consciousness some time during the morning, and that she must not be left alone for a moment.

"Mrs. Curtis, slip into the room to see Mollie," whispered Madge. "Phil and I must go to her now. She is unconscious, so your presence could not frighten her. I want you to see how beautiful she is. She is really the prettiest person I ever saw, except you," Madge declared, as she threw a kiss to her friend and hurried after Phil into the cabin.

Miss Jenny Ann went into the sitting-room to lie down. Eleanor and Lillian went into the kitchen to wash the dishes.

Madge and Phil sat side by side at Mollie's berth. Madge's eyes were fixed on Mollie's un-

conscious face, but Phil looked often at her chum. Phyllis cared very little for wealth and position, for fine clothes and servants, but she knew these things were very dear to her friend. Yet, in a vague way, she realized that Madge would be likely to grow into a finer, sweeter woman without them. Phyllis understood their little captain. She knew that Madge was full of fine impulses, was brave and loyal in the midst of difficulties; but she also knew that she was easily spoiled and that too much money and admiration would not be good for her.

"Phil," asked Madge, "isn't Mollie stirring? Is there anything we ought to do for her?"

Phil bent over to gaze more attentively at their patient. She studied every curve and line in the girl's exquisite face. Now that Mollie's eyes were closed, and the vacant, pathetic stare was no more visible in them, her beauty was the more remarkable. Something in Mollie's quiet features seemed to surprise Phyllis, but she said nothing.

"We can't do anything but wait," answered Phil. "The doctor said that quiet is all Mollie needs. She is sure to come to herself some time to-day."

Phil slid her chair up close beside her chum's and kissed her friend on the cheek. It was an unusual demonstration for the reserved Phyllis.

Madge stared at her. Then she turned a little pale. "You know what has happened to me, don't you?" she whispered. "I am sure you must know."

Phil bowed her head.

"Can't you help me decide?" begged Madge.

"No." Phil shook her head sadly. "You'll have to make up your mind for yourself."

The two girls sat in silence after this. They heard Mrs. Curtis come softly into the room and take a low chair in the far corner of the cabin, so as not to disturb Mollie if the girl should awake. She could just see the bed, but not the face of the girl on the pillow.

By and by Mollie stirred. "I am thirsty," she said distinctly. "Will some one please get me a glass of water?"

Phil rose quickly. "Here it is, Mollie," she answered, handing the girl the water, and trying to lift her with the other arm. Madge stooped over to aid her.

"Thank you," responded Mollie gently. "But why do you call me Mollie? My name isn't Mollie."

"We never liked to call you 'Moll'," replied Madge soothingly. "Mollie seemed to us to be a prettier name."

The girl laughed lightly. "No, I shouldn't think you would. My name is Madeleine, not

Mollie. And you are Phyllis and Madge. I wonder why I never told you before that my name is Madeleine." Mollie's eyes had lost their pathetic stare. They were quiet and reasonable.

"Don't try to talk, Mollie—Madeleine, I mean," murmured Phil. "You must try to go to sleep again."

She and Madge never changed their positions until the ill girl's head grew heavy on their arms and she slept peacefully.

"O Phil!" Madge faltered, "you don't think Mollie is going to——"

"Sh-sh!" returned Phyllis warningly. "Don't show her you are surprised at anything she says."

Madge clenched her hands to keep them from trembling, but she could feel her knees shaking under her.

The patient opened her eyes again. "I fell off the yacht, didn't I?" she inquired. "It's funny, but I couldn't think what had happened to me for a long time. I was trying to remember all night. It was such a long night. I kept seeing dreadful, rude men, who were cruel to me. I must have been dreaming. Where is my mother? Why doesn't she come to me?"

"Your mother!" exclaimed Madge. A glance from Phil silenced her.

"Your mother can't come to you now, she is——" Phyllis faltered.

"Never mind," the gentle girl spoke faintly. "Mother may be resting. She must have been dreadfully frightened when she learned I had tumbled overboard. I think something fell and struck me on the head."

"Don't talk any more, please, dear," entreated Phyllis. "You can tell us all about what happened when you have rested a little longer. You are very tired."

The sick girl dozed again. Phyllis and Madge slipped their aching arms out from under their patient's pillow.

"Mollie's memory has come back to her, hasn't it?" Madge breathed in her chum's ear. "I wonder if it will go away again, or if she will remember more about herself when she is stronger?"

"I believe her memory has returned," Phil answered softly. "It is a miracle. We must be very careful. Any excitement or surprise might kill her. I wish the doctor were here."

Some one stole across the room without a sound. The girls knew it must be Mrs. Curtis. Neither one of them stirred nor for the instant glanced at their friend; they were too intent on their patient. But they were grateful for her presence. She had heard Mollie's peculiar re-

marks. She would know what they ought to do when Mollie began to talk again.

Mrs. Curtis came so close to the sick girl's bed that Madge and Phil stepped back to let her have the nearest place. She leaned over and looked at Mollie as though she would never grow tired of gazing at her. Once her lips moved, but it was impossible to tell what she said. Then Mrs. Curtis's strength seemed to give way. She dropped on her knees, with her arms resting on the edge of Mollie's bed.

Ten minutes passed. No one moved or spoke in the tiny cabin chamber. Mollie slept peacefully. Mrs. Curtis did not stir. She was like a figure carved in stone. She was waiting for something to happen. Was it for the girl on the bed to speak again?

Madge and Phil scarcely dared to breathe. They did not understand the situation, but they felt themselves to be in the presence of a mystery. A drama was being enacted in the tiny room, and they were the only audience to it.

"Mother, where are you?" Mollie's voice sounded clear and strong.

"I am here," Mrs. Curtis replied softly, not stirring from her position by the bed.

"Why hasn't Tom been here to see me? And why are Phyllis and Madge so good to me? I don't understand."

Mollie turned restlessly on her pillow. Her hair fell away from her forehead and revealed the jagged, ugly scar. Mrs. Curtis saw it. For the first time she gave an involuntary shudder of emotion. Mollie put up her hand to her head with the old, familiar gesture of pain.

"My head hurts," she announced, as though she had not known of her injury before. "Have I been sick a long time? Somehow, you look so different."

Mrs. Curtis nodded. "Yes, daughter, you have been ill a long, long time. But you will be well and happy when you wake up again. You are with Mother now."

Mrs. Curtis gathered Mollie into her arms and the two girls stole out of the tiny cabin, closing the door behind them. The mother and daughter were alone.

"What has happened to you, Madge Morton? Why do you girls look so strangely at me?" demanded Tom Curtis as he caught sight of Madge's face. He was leaning against the deck rail staring curiously at his friends. "Is Mollie worse?"

"Oh, no; she is not worse. She is well. That is, she can remember. She is—— Oh, I don't know what I am saying," cried Madge in confusion.

Miss Jenny Ann came out of the sitting room.

Lillian and Eleanor also joined the little group on deck. Still Madge was silent.

"Ought I to tell?" she faltered, looking at Phyllis. "Don't you think Mrs. Curtis ought to tell Tom?"

"If you have bad news for me speak quickly!" returned Tom. "I would rather hear it from you than anybody in the world. You are almost like a sister to me, Madge."

The little captain went forward and put her hand gently on Tom's arm. "You won't need me for a sister now, Tom," she said gently. "Phil and I do not understand what has happened. Your mother will have to explain to you. But our Mollie is not Mollie at all. Her name is Madeleine. Her memory has come back to her. She thinks your mother is her mother. And Mrs. Curtis called her daughter!"

The cabin door opened. Mrs. Curtis walked out, moving like a woman in a dream. "Don't speak loudly," she said. "Madeleine has gone to sleep." She crossed over to Tom. "Tom," she explained quietly, "the girls have found your sister after twelve years; my baby is a young woman."

Tom put his arm about his mother. Mrs. Curtis spoke rapidly now, as though she feared her voice would fail her. "Miss Jones, years ago my little daughter, who was ten years old,

fell from our steam yacht. She had been left alone by her nurse for a few minutes. When the woman came back the child was not to be found. No one saw or heard her fall overboard. The boat was searched, but Madeleine had disappeared. We were off the coast of Florida. For months and months we searched for my daughter's body. We offered everything we had in the world for news of her. No word came. I used to think she would come back to me. Long ago I gave up hope. Now, when I saw this poor Mollie, I thought I recognized my child, and when she opened her eyes her memory returned to her. She knew I was her mother, in spite of my white hair. I think it is because she now remembers nothing of her unhappy past. She thinks she was hurt only a short time ago. She must not learn the truth until she is stronger. Will you keep me here with you until I can take my daughter home?"

Mrs. Curtis staggered slightly and grew very white. It was Madge who sprang to her side and led her to a chair. "You have found what you want most in the world," she whispered. "I am so glad for your sake."

CHAPTER XXIV

FAREWELL TO THE "MERRY MAID"

"MISS JENNY ANN, I can't get all these things packed in this barrel," protested Madge despairingly. "I don't see how they ever got in here before."

Miss Jenny Ann laughed from the depths of a large box, where she was folding sheets and placing them in neat piles. "Remember, we have added a number of tin pans to our store since we came aboard the houseboat. But don't worry, dear. We will get all the belongings packed in time."

"Isn't it too awful that the houseboat has to be left to its poor dear self for the rest of the summer? Just think, we have had over six weeks' holiday, and, if it weren't for Madeleine, it would seem like six days."

"I have something to tell you, Madge," announced Miss Jenny Ann, raising a flushed face from her task. "Do you remember when you came into the library, at school, and found me crying over a letter? I told you that I was frightened at what my doctor had written me. I have a different story to tell now. I am well as well

can be. I have gained ten pounds in six weeks; that is a record, isn't it?"

"I am so glad," bubbled Madge. "You've been the jolliest kind of a chaperon, dear Miss Jenny Ann, and we love you. You know I am sorry I used to be so disagreeable to you at school, and you do like me now, don't you?"

Miss Jenny Ann and Madge desisted from their labors long enough to embrace each other.

"Here, here, what is all this love-feast about?" demanded Tom Curtis cheerfully. He had come quietly aboard the houseboat, and was standing at the cabin door, smiling cheerfully at the little captain.

"Go away, Tom," returned Madge reproachfully. "I told you we couldn't have any company to-day. I said good-bye to you last night. We are getting things in shape to leave the houseboat. A man who has a boat-house is going to take care of the 'Merry Maid' for us until we come into another fortune and have another holiday."

"What time does your train leave?" inquired Tom coolly, picking up a hammer and preparing to fasten the top on Madge's barrel.

"At four o'clock," sighed Madge. "We are going to Baltimore together, and start home from there."

"It is all right, then," answered Tom Curtis

placidly. "I have plenty time to stay to luncheon."

"Tell him he can't, Miss Jenny Ann Jones," declared Madge inhospitably, "we haven't a thing to eat except some crackers and stale bread, and a few odd pieces of cold meat. And I am so dreadfully hungry that I can eat them all myself."

"I am going to stay just the same," asserted Tom. "I am going to be the busiest little worker on the 'Merry Maid'."

The houseboat party would never have finished its packing except for their uninvited visitor. He sat on trunks, fastened locks and doors. At one o'clock "The Merry Maid" was in order to be deserted.

"Let's go up to the farmhouse to get some food," suggested Tom. "I am hungry as a bear, and I know they will give us some milk and bread."

Madge demurred, but the other three girls and Miss Jenny Ann were much too hungry to stand on ceremony.

Tom led the way to the farmhouse as though he felt sure of his welcome.

At the old gate, however, they found Mrs. Curtis and Madeleine apparently waiting for them. "We couldn't bear that yesterday should be good-bye," explained Mrs. Curtis, putting

her arm about Madge and drawing her away from the others.

Madeleine held out her hands to Phyllis. She still looked white and fragile from her illness, but she was so exquisitely lovely that people turned about to gaze at her as she passed by them. Her face wore the expression of a serious child. She could not immediately make up for the lost years of her life, and she never left her mother or her brother but for a short time. Still she was at ease with the girls and talked a little with them. Her memory had come back to her, whether from the second blow on her head, or from the quiet life—which, the medical men could not say. After a while Madeleine would be able to take the place in the gay world which her beauty and wealth made for her. For the present she needed rest, quiet, and absolute peace of mind.

"You haven't changed your mind, have you, Madge?" asked Mrs. Curtis, as she and the little captain walked side by side to the farmhouse together.

Madge shook her head. "It isn't a case of changing my mind. I had not decided. Now that you have found your real daughter you surely do not wish to be burdened with an imitation one."

"But I still want you, my dear. A woman is

richer with two daughters than with one," replied Mrs. Curtis.

"No; you and Madeleine ought to be together," concluded Madge wisely. "You are awfully good, and I shall always feel that you are the best friend I have. But I had not been able to make up my mind to leave my own people and the girls, so, of course, everything has turned out for the best, and I am so happy for you and Tom and Madeleine. It is as good as playing a part in a fairy story to see one come true before your very eyes. Have you seen Captain Mike?" Madge lowered her voice, so that Madeleine could not overhear her.

Mrs. Curtis flushed. "Once, and for always. I hope never to look upon the dreadful man again. Tom felt that he and I must go to this Mike to ask him something of my little girl's history. He claims to have picked her up and, thinking her dead, left her for a few hours unnoticed in his sailboat. The man had done something reprehensible while in Florida, and was sailing for the Atlantic Ocean to flee from justice, so he did not stop to inquire about my child, or to give her more than a passing thought. His first wife was evidently a better woman than this second one. She worked with my Madeleine, brought her back to life and must have been good to her. But my baby could

never remember her name, nor tell anything about herself. Captain Mike was on the ocean for two weeks, and too ignorant to study the papers afterward. The first wife wished to keep the child. After a short time she died, and then——" Mrs. Curtis stopped abruptly.

"We won't ever mention it again," said Madge tactfully. "I can only say I am so glad you found her."

Mrs. Watson, the farmer's wife, met the houseboat party with a smiling face. She conducted them into the dining room. Miss Jenny Ann and the four girls sighed with satisfaction for they were very hungry. The great mahogany table was weighted down with food—roast chicken, ham, salad, doughnuts.

"This is Tom's party," smiled Mrs. Curtis, in answer to a look of delighted astonishment from Madge. "It was his idea to say a last good-bye to our houseboat friends, and to see them safely started on their journey toward home. But, Miss Jenny Ann, I have something to say. I wish to tell you a story and I wish you to tell me what you think without any reference to anybody or anything at this table."

'Of course I will," answered Miss Jenny Ann lightly, not dreaming what Mrs. Curtis intended to say.

"Suppose, once upon a time you had lost

something very precious," continued Mrs. Curtis. "Say it was a mine of precious stones. Suppose you had hunted for years but could never find it. After a while some friends discover the treasure for you, and give it back to you? Don't you believe you would like to do something to show your gratitude?"

"Certainly I should," replied Miss Jenny Ann promptly, falling into the trap.

"Then why not let *me* have a houseboat party this fall?" proposed Mrs. Curtis. "Madeleine and I will be staying near Old Point Comfort. Tom will be camping with some boy friends near Cape Charles. I am going to count on your bringing the houseboat down the shore to pay us a visit and you are to be my guests from the moment you set foot on the boat."

The four chums looked at Mrs. Curtis, their eyes shining with delight. Another holiday on their beloved houseboat! But ought they accept so great a gift from Mrs. Curtis. They understood that it was her intention to finance the trip.

Tom looked at his watch. "It's a pity to break up the party. But as we are to drive to the village we must soon be off. The expressman has already taken the trunks. You'd better accept mother's invitation."

"We thank you," said Madge slowly, "but

will you give us a few days in which to decide? Then we will write you at Old Point Comfort."

"Very well," replied Mrs. Curtis, "but let us hope that your answer will be 'yes.' I wish you would look upon the trip as a love offering from Madeleine."

Mrs. Curtis looked wistfully at the circle of girlish faces. Her eyes, mute with pleading, met Madge's. They seemed to say, "Why not decide now, and make us happy?"

Their appeal was too strong for Madge. "Girls, I think we ought to accept Mrs. Curtis's gift to us. It is right and she wishes us to do so. Of what use is it to wait three days. Let us say 'yes' now and then we shall all be happy. All together! Is it 'yes'?"

"'Yes,'" chorused four voices.

Madge turned to Mrs. Curtis. "We must say good-bye this minute, but we'll write you, and one of these days you'll find our 'Ship of Dreams' anchored on your beach."

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